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Snowflake Sam's Double;



OR, THE RANCH ROPE-KING.

A ROMANCE OF ARIZONA.

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AUTHOR OF "THE STRANGER SPORT FROM
SPOKANE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A RACE AGAINST TIME.

"In the Glass Mountain Gorge! By dynamite!"
Snowflake Sam thrust his head around the

"IT'S NOT A PLOT, JUDGE LYNCH! THAT'S HIS BLOODY HANDKERCHIEF, AND HE KNOWS IT! HE'S THE MURDERER!"

angle of the veranda, to see who had uttered those ominously-suggestive words.

Though it was as dark out there as "a stack of black cats," he was yet able to make out the forms of two men, who stood, with heads close together, whispering of a matter that was apparently of great concern to them.

The low words that followed made Snowflake Sam sure it was also a matter of great concern to him.

"The stage is due to pass through there between ten and eleven, and there's a lot of money from the new mines in Salt Valley that it'll carry; besides, old Benson and his outfit will—"

The words stopped, and the men shuffled away, as a form came in that direction from the railway.

Snowflake Sam sat like a statue in his seat in the veranda corner, screened by the darkness, though the words had so thrilled him that his blood leaped and he was fairly quivering with excitement. He knew the Glass Mountain Gorge; he knew of the new mines in Salt Valley; and he reflected that if he didn't know all about "Benson and his outfit," no one else in that section did.

Still he sat there, as motionless as the veranda railing, till sure the speakers had entirely withdrawn, and while the newcomer mounted the steps to the hotel office.

The veranda belonged to the Golconda Hotel, in the lumbering and trading town of Flagstaff, Arizona.

The eager buzz of a sawmill, whose owners were not satisfied with what they could do in the daylight hours, filled the air.

Just beyond the veranda gleamed the yellow oil lamps of the streets, with the lights of the business houses and the saloons scattered here and there; while, as a background, but marked at that hour only by the red camp-fire of a hunting party, rose the lava-crusted San Francisco Mountains.

Though so familiar with the region, it was a long time since Snowflake Sam had seen it; and he had entered the town as an unrecognized stranger, arriving from the west, that morning, on the Frisco Express.

"The Glass Mountain Gorge! Between ten and eleven!"

Snowflake Sam pulled himself together, went into the hotel office, and looked at his watch.

The office lamp revealed him as a young man of prepossessing appearance and manly air. He was probably twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with a blonde mustache that shaded a handsome mouth, and pleasant blue eyes that could sparkle with excitement on occasion.

As for clothing, he wore a closely-fitting suit of a silvery gray material, that held in its warp and woof a snowy shine, which, beneath the lamplight, glittered like frost crystals.

It was this peculiarity of his dress, perhaps, that caused him to assume the title of Snowflake Sam, though, in the hotel record he had signed, "Samuel Snowflake."

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Snowflake?" the night clerk asked, bustling forward and pretending that he had not been half asleep in his chair behind the desk.

Sam looked at him closely, as if debating whether he should ask a question in return.

"Nothing, thank you," comparing his watch with the clock on the wall.

Then he dropped his time-keeper into a pocket and passed out into the street. "My God! Only an hour? Perhaps less!"

He ran with quick steps across the street and down the railway track until he came to a livery table.

All was dark in and around it, but he rapped briskly on the door, supplementing the raps with a vigorous kick or two, which had the desired effect. A head was thrust out of a hole above and a

sleepy voice demanded to know what was wanted.

"A horse, at once! The fastest and the best you've got!"

The tone was so imperious that the man descended from the loft without delay, lighted a lantern, and swung open the stable door.

"I've got to make Glass Mountain Gorge is less than an hour! It's a matter of life and death!"

He thrust a gold piece into the man's hand.

"I'm Snowflake Sam, and I'm stopping up at the Golconda. I'll pay your bill, whatever it is. No time for explanations now. And, if I kill your horse I'll pay for him!"

The man moved to a stall, and Sam, who was at his heels, took a saddle down from a peg and slapped it on the horse's back and cinched it fast while the man was putting on the bridle.

In another minute they were out in the dark street.

The man seemed about to hesitate, and was evidently questioning himself whether he ought to let a stranger take a horse in this way; but Snowflake cut the reflections short by leaping into the saddle and urging the horse at once to a gallop.

The man glanced after him and looked at the coin, which he drew from his pocket. He still had the lantern in his hand.

"Twenty dollars! The broncho ain't worth much more than that! Let him go!"

Snowflake was already clattering across the railway track and into the pine woods that girded the town.

"Less than an hour! Not over fifty minutes, I fancy. Likely not forty, if the stage is on time. Can I make it? Heavens! I hope the stage will be behind time, to-night for once!"

The trail was rough and strewn with lava boulders, the pines rose all about him, and the lane that had been hewn through these looked as dark as a tunnel. But he saw that the rising moon was guiding the peaks of the San Francisco Mountains, and knew that its light would soon aid him.

Aye, it would aid the scoundrels, too, whose dastardly purpose he hoped to thwart.

He knew what that purpose was quite as well as if he had heard the whole story. A lot of cut-throats and robbers meant to dynamite the stage and thus kill its passengers for purposes of robbery and revenge!

The broncho was a speedy animal, and Snowflake Sam did not spare it. With almost frenzied speed he flew down the trail. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes went by! Forty minutes!

The big black hill of obsidian known as Glass Mountain was just before him.

Here was the Glass Mountain Gorge, through which ran the cross trail from Salt Valley to Mimbres!

Into this cross trail he turned, and then drew the broncho to a halt. The sweat was pouring from it; flakes of foam lathered its sides and legs and dropped to the ground. It panted and quivered beneath him.

"I've got to go through the gorge! That stage is coming from Salt Valley!"

He was reasonably sure the dynamiters were in the gorge; but he did not know just at what point; nor had he definite information as to their plans.

To plunge into that black gorge was like walking into a lion's den. Yet he hesitated only for a moment. Then he drew the rein tighter, settled himself firmly in the saddle, and again drove on.

"If I go under, it will at least serve to give a warning to the people in the stage!" was his grim reflection.

Every nerve was strained to the utmost, every sense was on the alert. At each bend he expected to behold the shadowy forms of the men he feared, and to hear a shot and the command to halt.

But he saw and heard nothing, until he was well out of the gorge.

Then the hoofs of the broncho struck a line of wire stretched across the trail and a dynamite mine opened almost beneath its feet!

The very earth seemed to lift itself in a sheet of flame, that quivered and roared like the rending of a volcano, and Snowflake Sam shot through the air as from a catapult, struck the earth heavily more than a dozen feet away, where he lay, unconscious.

The pony was killed outright.

Two hundred yards away a stage came to a shuddering halt, the horses almost thrown from their feet, and the passengers piled in confusion on top of each other.

But no one in the stage was hurt; for Snowflake Sam had won in his race against time!

CHAPTER II.

BENSON, THE RANCH KING.

A man extricated himself from the confusion in the stage, and, crawling out through the door, with a rifle, squatted in the trail, and began to pump lead in the direction of the gorge.

Under the circumstances, it seemed a queer thing to do; but Orrin Jude was guessing pretty correctly as to the cause of what had happened, and as to the proper course to pursue.

Those screaming rifle balls, ploughing into the lava and obsidian, and glancing and whizzing, kept the outlaws from rushing out.

They were a puzzled lot just then; and these shots tended to throw them into a panic. They knew that a horseman had exploded their dynamite mine, and not the stage from Salt Valley, which last was the thing they wanted it to wreck.

"Charge 'em, now, boys!" Orrin Jude yelled. "Don't hang back! Give it to 'em!"

The people Orrin Jude was calling on were still in a tangled heap; but, then, as he did not expect them to obey, that did not much matter.

Under the inspiration of his words, they untangled themselves and got the better of their fears, and were revealed as a man, two women and a child—Benson, the Ranch King; Miss Huldah Benson, his adopted daughter; Irene Benson, a girl of eight or nine, who was his own child, and Miss Moxie Wilmot, a faithful but eccentric servant. These, with Orrin Jude, the Rope King, whose rifle was disturbing the outlaws, constituted the party which the stage had held.

There was the stage driver, of course, in addition.

He had leaped for the horses' heads as soon as he could collect his wits; but now, having in a measure quitted the frightened beasts, he pulled a pistol from his hip pocket, and joined the Rope King in sending bullets singing into the black mouth of Glass Mountain Gorge.

This course had the desired effect. It convinced the outlaws that the stage was guarded by armed men, and that they could hope for nothing but bullets and death by making an attack on it. In consequence they disappeared, quietly, from the vicinity.

Snowflake came to his senses, while the balls were still screaming past and over him, and rubbed himself gingerly to see that he had no broken bones. His head seemed still to be spinning round and round, with the jar of the concussion.

He lay still for a minute, listening to the shots. Then he crawled farther into the strip of woods, to get out of the pathway of the balls; after which he rose to an upright position and circled through the timber toward the point of firing.

Before he reached the stage the shots had ceased. The driver had got out a lantern, which he was lighting, and the women and the girl were screened behind a lava block.

"I tell ye they've gone!" Orrin Jude was declaring, with ferocious exclamations. "The cowards run like sheep. Ah! there's one, now!"

He threw up the rifle and covered Sam, who was advancing.

"A friend!" Snowflake called out. "Don't shoot!"

The Rope King lowered the weapon with apparent reluctance.

"Friends is gineraly foes, sometimes!"

The driver having got the lantern going, now flashed its light on Snowflake, who approached the stage, curiously eyeing the group he saw before him.

In a few words he introduced himself, saying he was a stranger in the country and had heard talk at the hotel which had acquainted him with the plot, and that he had ridden hard to bring the news and thwart the desperadoes.

Orrin Jude took him by the hand, with cowboy fervor, exclaiming:

"From this on, ferever, count the Rope King your friend! an' you'll find him a man to tie to!"

The tone was so boastful that the fervency of the statement lost much of its effect, but Sam returned the cowboy's squeeze with singular warmth.

Miss Moxie Wilmot, who was a maiden of uncertain summers, and who, through the reading of weak-ly story paper novels, was always keyed to a nervous pitch, clasped the cowboy about the neck, at this juncture and wildly demanded to know if the villains were gone.

"Oh, it was dreadful!" she panted. "Horreeble! They were after me, I know! Do you think they have gone, Orrin, dear?"

Judging by her tone, she was much afraid they were gone, and that she would not be carried off by them.

"You're perfectly safe!" he declared, setting her on her feet. "When they heered the rattle of this hyer gun, you bet they got up and dusted! It's my opinion they're a-goin' yit!"

If Miss Moxie was hysterical, Orrin Jude was as boastful a cowboy as ever trod the Arizona mesas. However, he was not a coward, as most boasters are.

Snowflake Sam gave his attention to Benson, the Ranch King, and to Huldah and Irene, who were standing in a shaky group, not at all assured, as yet, of their safety.

In addition to the startle and fright, Benson seemed to be suffering from some nervous affection, which now almost overmastered him. His teeth chattered as if through fear, and Miss Huldah found it difficult to quiet him.

She was grateful, therefore, for the interference of the newcomer, for there was something in the very tone and manner of Snowflake to bring courage and confidence.

The Ranch King took on new resolution almost instantly; and, when it was proposed to go into the mouth of the gorge and inspect the work of the dynamite, by the aid of the lantern, he was quite as anxious to go as was Orrin Jude.

It was found that a great hole had been torn in the earth where the dynamite had exploded. Near this hole lay the dead pony, and close by were pieces of the wire by which the mine had been touched off.

But there was not a human being in the gorge, or near it.

When this was made certain, the saddle was peeled from the back of the dead pony, and the bridle removed from its head; and Snowflake Sam, at the invitation of the Ranch King, got into the stage for the purpose of riding on to Mimbres Station, near Benson's ranch.

The dynamite hole was carefully avoided, the stage pushed cautiously through the gorge, and then the driver, with increasing courage, cracked his whip and sent the restive horses spinning on.

As he did so, Snowflake began to talk again of what he had heard in Flagstaff.

"There wasn't an ounce of dust or treasure in this thing, and there ain't now!" Benson asserted. "They made a mistake, if they thought to get a haul of that kind out of this stage!"

Snowflake Sam was studying the Ranch King closely, his interest in the old man peculiarly marked. He saw that Benson was not just right in his head; that there was a string loose somewhere.

"And he used to be the brightest man in all this country! I wonder what's caused it?"

The answer was volunteered by Miss Huldah, when they got out at the stage station at Mimbres, where cowboys were awaiting them with horses and the family carriage; and it was drawn from her by some eccentricity on the part of the Ranch King.

"Father has never been himself since Arthur ran away from home!"

"When was that?"

"Fifteen years or more ago!"

"And he has never been heard of since?"

"Oh, yes! He is at home now! He came back six weeks ago, from Australia, where he's been in the sheep business!"

Snowflake Sam's face assumed a strange look and his lips tightened.

"At home now? Then I'll get to see him soon! I feel sure it will be a great pleasure!"

Snowflake Sam had been invited to visit the ranch and to remain there as long as pleased, for all felt duly grateful to him for the part he had performed in saving them from the dynamiters.

He got into the carriage beside Miss Huldah and the Ranch King. The beauty of the girl greatly attracted him.

She was a girl of wondrously beautiful face, despite the fact that the harsh desert winds of Arizona had not treated it well. It was undeniably sun-burnt, but not sufficiently to detract from its loveliness.

He had a multitude of questions to ask her about this returned wanderer, Arthur Benson; to all of which he listened with singular eagerness.

And the eagerness leaped into a flame that shone in his eyes, hotly and fiercely, when the ranch was reached, and he saw before him the man of his questions and his thoughts.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURNED WANDERER.

Arthur Benson did not like Snowflake Sam. Everybody on the ranch said that, and everybody was right.

The reason was obvious. Snowflake Sam had fallen in love with Huldah Benson; and Arthur Benson had done that very same thing, before Snowflake had made his appearance there.

As for Miss Huldah, it would have taken a shrewd head to say which of these two young men she cared for most, or if she markedly cared for either of them.

Arthur Benson, determined to settle the matter, seized the first opportunity of speaking to Miss Huldah.

She had just come in from a ride, and he had assisted her to dismount. The color in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes made her temptingly fair.

"I've been wanting to speak to you for a good while, Huldah," he faltered. "It is your father's wish, you know—it is my wish—that we should marry. I can't express to you how much I love you!"

"Father doesn't know what he is speaking about when he talks of such things. As for me—well, I'm not ready to marry anybody yet! When did you speak to him about it?"

"Only yesterday. He said it seemed like it would be brother marrying sister; but that it would make him happy, and we are of no kin!"

When she returned from the corral she went tremblingly to the Ranch King's room, determined to question him about this proposal of his son.

She summoned her courage; and, with a sinking heart, saw his eyes brighten when the subject was broached.

"It would please me," he said, stroking her hair.

"But I don't love him, father!"

Though the Ranch King was not her

father—as she was only an adopted child—she always called him so, and their feelings for each other were those of father and daughter.

Before the coming of Arthur she had been all in all to him; for Irene was still but a child. Now he seemed to have given Arthur the first place in his affections.

The interview was so very unsatisfactory that she left the room of the Ranch King with trembling and tears. But she was resolved that, whatever might be the wishes of Benson, she would not give her hand in marriage to his son.

Hardly was she out of the room when Arthur entered it. But he had not come to talk of the love he professed for Miss Huldah.

He held in his hand a deed to a certain tract of very valuable timber land lying just south of Flagstaff, which was the property of the Ranch King. The deed, which was to transfer this property to himself, Arthur wanted his father to sign.

The arrangements had all been made the previous day, and nothing was now required but this signature.

Benson looked hesitatingly over the paper, and finally dipped a pen into ink.

"Why do you need so much money, Arthur? This is the second deed I have signed in a week. You are not deceiving me?"

"I have told you the truth! That first was to pay a debt, but this is to invest in cattle. It will double itself in a year!"

Benson signed the paper and passed it over.

"I'll get Skeen, the notary, to attest this. He don't care whether you come before him or not, and it will be all right."

Then he got out of the room as quick as he could, as if he feared the Ranch King might change his mind and want the deed back.

The fact that these two deeds had been made, together with many other things that were not pleasing to him, came speedily to the knowledge of Orrin Jude.

Orrin was the ranch foreman, and a reliable all-around man, knowing more about the cattle business in a day than many cowboys know in a month.

Above all, he was faithful to his employer's interests; and, while in many respects he was a great braggart and made himself laughable by his blustering, not a man on the ranch but could have been more readily spared.

There were mighty few thoughts or ideas in Orrin's bullet head which he did not sooner or later confide to Miss Moxie Wilmot.

Miss Moxie was his ideal of what a young woman should be, and Orrin had dreams of a day to come when he should have a cattle ranch of his own with Miss Moxie to enjoy it with him.

"I don't like that there 'returned wanderer' a bit! He's too much like the prodigal of Scriptor—only that the prodigal come back a-repentin' an' he didn't. Anyway, I say he's a-playin' the old man fine!"

Miss Moxie looked at the bread in the oven, burning her fingers in the process, then stepped softly back and whispered.

"Maybe he ain't a returned son a-tall! Maybe he's a fraud! In that novel I was readin' last night 'bout the Castles of Castle Cumber, the heirress fell in love with a man that was a—"

"Oh, shet up 'bout your castles an' sich!" Orrin ungallantly put in. "He's the son of the old Ranch King, I don't doubt; fer I know myself that he looks a good deal like the boy that run away, thirteen years ago. But I'll say to you, what I wouldn't say to everybody, that it wouldn't be a bad thing if he should fall off'n a cliff some night, an' break his han'some neck."

"If that was in one of the stories, now, that's jist what'd happen. But it won't happen hyer, fer Arthur's got too much sense to go moonin' round in the dark."

even if he is dead struck on Miss Huldah."

This quiet little talk with Miss Moxie was had on the evening of the day in which the deed was made; and as Orrin Jude left the kitchen and stepped quietly out into the darkness he saw a shadow slipping along beneath the wide piazza of the ranch building, and followed it, determined to know what the stealthy movement meant.

The shadow did not go far. It approached the window of the room at the end of the ranch house that had been assigned to Snowflake Sam, and there it crouched in a listening attitude.

From the first there had been something in the very bearing of Snowflake Sam which had caused Orrin Jude to admire him intensely, and Orrin now witnessed this action with considerable anger.

Orrin loosed the rope which he habitually carried at his waist and held it in his right hand, as he bent forward, wondering who the spy was.

It was very clear to him in a minute that the spy was not only trying to hear what was being said in the room, but was trying to see what was going on.

"I'll jist snake him in!"

With this Orrin crept a little nearer, gave the coiled rope a swinging whirl, and launched the noose at the head of the shadow, without once dreaming what the revelation would be.

The noose flew true; and, falling about the neck of the eavesdropper, was tightened with a jerk that threw the fellow to the ground.

Before he could recover Orrin was astride of him, holding him down and bellowing for help.

Snowflake Sam ran out of the room, and two or three cowboys came tumbling out of the adjacent bunk house.

Then Orrin Jude released his struggling victim, who leaped to his feet.

There was a common cry:

"Arthur Benson!"

Benson seemed confused for a moment, then began to bluster, doubtless thinking that the surest way out of the scrape; for, as the son of the Ranch King, he was possessed of authority.

"You was actin' so much like a sneak that I thought you was one!" Orrin Jude apologized. "Kerry a lantern next time, and I'll know who you air!"

"I didn't intend to eavesdrop!" Arthur asserted. "I heard a noise in there, as if there was fighting going on—or I thought I did—and I stopped just a minute; when, whiz! came that rope about my neck!"

It was a lame apology, but Snowflake Sam seemed to accept it; and the incident ended without an exhibition of bad blood.

CHAPTER IV.

A BIT OF STRANGE TALK.

Snowflake Sam had already been watching the movements of Arthur Benson, and he now watched them more closely than ever.

This watching bore fruit, two nights later.

In the shadow of a pine, which stood near the corner of the corral, Arthur Benson met a stranger, with whom he began to converse, and whom he called Tiger Dan.

The name was enough to give any one a start; for it was the name of a notorious outlaw, whose deeds of robbery and blood had made him hated and feared throughout the territory.

What could Arthur Benson have in common with such a character?

This was the question that Snowflake Sam asked himself, as he wriggled, snakelike, along the ground, to a better position, where he could see and hear without being discovered.

In doing this, the shadow of a wall of sod protected him and screened him from the gaze of the two men.

Confident that they were alone, Arthur Benson and Tiger Dan talked freely and at some length although they were still cautious enough to speak in low tones.

"When do you want this raid to take place?" Tiger Dan asked.

"The sooner the better for me! I've got things all my own way now, but I don't know how long I can hold 'em. With the old man out of the way, there'll be no need to coax deeds out of him to get a little money; for then I'll be heir to the whole business. And it's a big estate, you know."

"The biggest in the territory, I reckon?"

"By far the largest. This home ranch here covers a whole county, nearly. Then there's that other ranch down on Salt River! And another in the valley of the Gila! And cattle till you can't count them, to say nothing at all of ponies. Old Benson's the biggest ranch king in Arizona!"

"It's a big stake, and I hope you're playing it fine. I reckon a million dollars won't more than cover the amount you'll get?"

"At least that, I calculate. But the old chap may take it into his head to go back on me at any minute. Lord! If he should will everything to that girl, Huldah! Well, I'd have to marry her, then, by hook or crook!"

Tiger Dan laughed in a ghoulish way, and Snowflake Sam fairly shuddered at the coolness with which these men contemplated their proposed crimes.

"Well, it'll take a day or two!" said Tiger Dan. "And mebbe longer. Mebbe a week. I've got to git the boys together. You want the old man out of the way, I reckon?"

"Yes; there mustn't be any mistake about that! Then I come in as his heir! See?"

It was certainly a cold-blooded thought for a son to harbor.

"I'd like to choke his black heart out for that!" Snowflake Sam muttered, his fingers working convulsively. "And it's bound to come—an open war between us, mighty soon! I don't know but I'm a fool for not making a break at once. I don't doubt I could put him on the defensive. But then, the Ranch King is so taken with his lies and thinks him such an angel!"

There was uncommon bitterness in the expression, showing that the hate he bore Arthur Benson was of no ordinary kind.

"Can't you do it inside of a week?"

"I dunno. It will take that long, nearly, for me to git some of my men hyer; fer a lot of them air way down on the Mexican line."

When the talk was ended Tiger Dan slipped away through the darkness, heading toward the lava hills that came close up, on the south, and Arthur Benson turned back toward the ranch house.

As he did so he passed near the crouching form of Snowflake Sam, in the shadow of the sod wall.

For a moment the impulse was strong in Snowflake Sam to spring out of his place of hiding and throttle the scoundrel; but he checked the impulse, deeming the time not yet ripe for such a course, and Arthur Benson, scheming to kill the Ranch King, went on and into the dwelling where the Ranch King sat, and soon afterward engaged him in lively and pleasant conversation.

CHAPTER V.

ORRIN JUDE AND HIS SWEETHEART.

"He's a mighty nice man, is that Snowflake Sam!"

Miss Moxie Wilmot looked keenly at Orrin Jude as she made this assertion, hoping to see Orrin color with displeasure.

If there was one creature in the world that Miss Moxie loved, it was Orrin Jude, the Rope King; and if there was a being in the world that the Rope King adored, that being was Moxie Wilmot, the servant girl. And yet, neither liked to unduly confess this very palpable liking to the other.

Orrin did not reply, but puckered his lips in sober thought, and she gave the flapjacks a toss, while she considered what she should say next.

"He makes me think of Lord Fiddlestone, that I was reading 'bout in that story yesterday!"

"Lord Fiddlesticks, ye mean!"

"He was a mighty nice man, was Lord Fiddlestone! Han'some and high-bred, and kind to women an' all that! And his mustache it turned up at the ends, and his eyes they—"

Orrin thrust a hand into a pocket and drew out a silver dollar.

"What'll you charge me to let up on that, Moxie? This hyer talk 'bout lords an' sich, that you're allus gittin' off, makes me sick. If this hyer Snowflake Sam looks like a lord, blessed if I don't go out and pound his head off, 'fore he gits a chance to run away with all the women on the place! Jist say 'furrin' lord' to a woman an' she's got her head up an' comin' like a skeered cow!"

"You're jealous, that's what's the matter with you! You think—"

"Don't make no difference what I think! Them's my sentiments 'bout lords!"

He twisted about, folded up a paper-bound book which he saw lying on the table, and opened the stove door.

The cloth she held in her hand dropped to the floor, and she leaped toward him with a scream.

"Orrin Jude. What d'ye mean?"

"Thought mebbe I'd better burn up Lord Fiddlesticks and the rest of 'em! And the next time I go up to Flagstaff I'll hire the newsdealer up there to never sell you sich truck ag'in!"

She gave him a resounding box on the ear, pulled Lord Fiddlestone out of the mouth of the stove, and held the volume beyond reach.

"An' this other one?—Arthur? Is he quite as nice as Snowflake Sam?" Orrin asked.

"I don't like him!" she hissed.

Orrin tipped his chair against the wall and laughed.

"No half-way bizness 'bout you, eh? Well, when you fall in love with me, it'll be head over years, I don't doubt—which I hope the time's a-comin'!"

"I've licked men and made love to women, an' I've had adventoors—"

"And told lies!" she put in.

"Will you keep still? I was goin' to say I never had sich an adventoor as when I got my rope round the head of that there Arthur Benson!"

Her mouth came open with a gasp of surprise.

"Oh, I didn't tell ye 'bout it, did I? Well, I will, then!"

He did, and Miss Moxie Wilmot thought it the strangest story she had heard in many a day.

"I've been thinkin' of what you said the other night, that mebbe this wasn't the real returned son and all that! Well, did ye ever notice that limp that he's sometimes got?"

She nodded.

"He says that he froze his foot while he was up in Alaska in the gold fields. He lies! I saw his foot this mornin', and he's lame frum a pistol shot!"

"Orrin!"

"It's a fact! I've seen enough of pistol wounds—a fighter like me!—to tell one when I run acrost it!"

This was too much of a secret for Miss Moxie to retain, and a half-hour later she was telling it to Miss Huldah.

She went to Miss Huldah's apartments ostensibly to do some work, and poured the tale into her ear as she wielded the dust brush.

That night Huldah visited the Ranch King and communicated to him the story of the pistol wound in the foot.

This visit was made at an opportune time. For, notwithstanding he had just had a deed made and signed, Arthur had prepared another, which was in the Ranch King's possession, for his signature.

Huldah caught it up.

"Why are you going to deed Arthur the silver mine at Sarsenac?"

He drew away the paper, as if he did not wish her to see it.

She was quite pale, for a horrible suspicion had flashed on her.

"Have you been making other deeds like this?"

The Ranch King did not want to answer, but she forced the reply from him.

A knock came to the door, and she, opening it, saw Arthur Benson.

She stepped aside to let him in, and then stood with her back against the door.

"I want to know, Arthur, why you have been getting father to make those deeds to you? Why do you want to get rid of that property? That mine, experts say, will be worth a great deal by and by, if we hold on to it!"

He tried to hide the sudden fire that flashed in his eyes, but did not succeed.

"Except as my future wife, what right have you to ask such questions? I am the one whose property this will be by and by!"

It was an unfortunate speech. The Ranch King, who had been trembling, straightened up with sudden and unexpected energy.

"Get out of this room!" Benson thundered. "You are an undutiful and ungrateful dog. And as for marrying my darling Huldah, that is something you shall never do! Get out of here! Do you hear?"

"Why this change? If I have done or said anything wrong, I'm sure I beg pardon!"

"You are disgracing the Benson name!"

The eccentric and half-crazed old ranchman would not say more, nor would he change his attitude toward Arthur, and the latter went out of the room in a hot rage.

CHAPTER VI.

A SAVAGE ASSAULT.

Unfortunately for the peace of the ranch, Arthur Benson was hardly twenty steps from the door, and still in a towering rage, when he encountered Orrin Jude.

"I want to see you!"

The tone was a vicious and uncompromising command, which ruffled the temper of the Rope King immediately.

Arthur walked on out toward the corral, Orrin Jude slowly and suspiciously following him. Then Orrin stopped.

"Coward!" Arthur snarled, when he discovered this. "Why don't you come on? Are you afraid of me? I only want to tell you that you must keep your hands off my affairs hereafter, or you'll have to settle with me! I can say that much, right here and now, and I mean it."

Orrin Jude's anger boiled over. He was not used to being addressed in that style.

"I reckon you don't mean more'n half what you're sayin'!"

Orrin had his hand on his rope, and backed slowly, not wanting to be forced into the fight which seemed imminent. He had no positive proof that Arthur was playing a double part, and a rupture might lose him his position on the ranch. Still, he did not intend to be bullied.

"Coward!" Arthur hissed.

Then, quick as a flash, and before Orrin knew what was in his mind, Arthur's fist shot out.

The blow was aimed straight at the Rope King's face, and, if it had struck fairly, would have knocked him down. But Orrin Jude ducked quickly, and the fist only scraped the top of his head, knocking off his heavy white hat.

The next instant he brought the noose of the lasso down across Arthur's cheek with such force that it made a red welt and drew the blood.

With a cry that sounded like that of a wild beast, Arthur Benson hurled himself on the ranch foreman, and, closing with him, the two went down in a heap.

Arthur fell on top, and immediately reached for the foreman's throat with one hand, while he tried to batter his face with the other.

But Orrin Jude writhed from under

him, hurled him away and leaped to his feet. Then his hand dropped to his hip and a revolver came out.

"I don't want to kill you, Arthur Benson, but if you come at me that way again I'll do it, if I'm swung the next second!"

The pale moonlight showed his face, which, under the tan, was as white as ashes. He set his teeth hard and was evidently struggling with himself.

"Put up that pistol!" was Arthur's hoarse command. "If you don't, I'll have to pull another, and then we'll raise the ranch!"

Orrin dropped the pistol back into his hip pocket.

"I don't keer to take the advantage of a 'drop.' If you want to pull on me, go ahead, and we'll see who kin git out a gun first!"

"I shall not pull a pistol on you, but—"

He came straight up to Orrin and shook a finger threateningly:

"You'll pay for this, Orrin Jude! You'll drain every drop of blood out of your body to pay for this!"

"I'm willin' to meet you at any time and place! Of course, if you want to play the sneak and try to git me in that way—"

"I guess we'd better drop this thing! I was mad, and I'm not in the best of humors yet. You made me mad by interfering in my business!"

"I never interfered in your business!"

"That's a—! Well, I won't say harsh words. If you've never interfered in my business, don't begin it, that's all! Remember that!"

He turned his back on Orrin Jude and walked straight away, and as soon as he was out of sight Orrin Jude went to the room of Snowflake Sam with the story.

Snowflake Sam looked grave when he had heard it.

"That man is a devil, Orrin! I've seen it ever since I've been here. Look out for trouble. Keep your eyes peeled. He'll strike in the dark."

CHAPTER VII.

PLANNING A RAID.

Neither of them dreamed, however, of the terrible shape that the vengeance of Arthur Benson would take.

Nevertheless, what was in the heart of Arthur Benson was not to be revealed by him.

He had hardly left Orrin Jude when he began to realize to its full extent how much of a fool he had been in making that savage assault. It made an enemy of one who might have been a friend, and tended to create suspicion where there was apparently no reason for its existence.

The next morning Arthur sought the ranch foreman, and, going up to him with his pleasantest smile, held out his hand.

Orrin looked him in the face. The mark made by the rope had been skillfully removed or hidden. The point where the skin had been cut was covered with a bit of court plaster.

"I was too hasty last night, and I'm sorry. Everything I said or did I withdraw. I want you to be my friend, and I want to be yours. The truth is, I had a little too much wine aboard."

Though Orrin Jude was surprised and puzzled, he accepted the proffered hand in a warm-hearted way.

"Of course, if you don't mean it, why, they hain't nobody that's quicker to forget than I am. My mad ginerally holds fire a good while when it gits well to burnin', but I'll pour water on it immediately if you say so!"

"Well, I say so. I was a fool!"

Then he began to talk about the ponies and the cattle and the work of the spring round-up, subjects in which he knew Orrin would be interested.

He came to Orrin again that afternoon, descending from the room of the Ranch King.

This time there was a look of uneasiness on his face.

"Bad news, Orrin, and an order from father for you! The Apaches are beginning to raid and the cattle down south are in danger. Father wants you to take most of the cowboys and go at once to Salton's Crossing, and bring in all the cattle that are in that section; and he says for you to start at once!"

Orrin Jude was much astonished by the information and the order. The Apaches had been peaceful for a long time, and he did not believe there was any danger. Moreover, he fancied if there was danger he would have been one of the first to hear it.

Arthur did not volunteer the source of his information, but hurried away as soon as the order was given, and Orrin Jude went up to Benson's room to get his instructions from headquarters.

"You must go to Salton's at once! Arthur has news that the Apaches are threatening the cattle down there!"

This was not very satisfactory to Orrin Jude; but he began his preparations without further delay or questions, wondering all the while if there was really any danger from the Apaches, or if Arthur was not working some scheme for his own benefit.

Already some of the cowboys were absent. Snowflake Sam was away, as was also Huldah.

In this desolate sand valley, ringed in by lava hills that shut out the view in every direction, a dozen men were logging themselves up in Indian fighting costume—in the war costume of the Apaches, which consists of little or nothing except loin cloths and paint.

They were white men; and they were coloring their bodies and faces to the hue of an Indian's, and with much skill transforming themselves, as far as it was possible, into the counterpart of the terrible destroyers who followed in the footsteps of Geronimo, Nana, and other monsters of that ilk.

Among them was one, who, though his face was streaked and he looked more like a savage than all the rest, was now and then addressed as Tiger Dan.

He was a man of fifty-five or more years, a hardened villain, who had long escaped the gallows because of his shrewdness and the shielding character of the country in which he lived.

Of all these ranchmen, Tiger Dan hated Benson the heartiest. And recently he had had his hate of the man re-aroused, for through Benson's influence one of his best men, caught in a gambling scrape in Flagstaff, had been convicted of highway robbery and sent to the territorial penitentiary at Yuma.

It will readily be seen, therefore, that Tiger Dan was in just the humor to heartily second the desires of Arthur Benson.

As the painting and feathering went on, Tiger Dan looked wishfully at the sun.

It was descending rapidly.

"I hope we'll have better luck than we did with that dynamite trick!" he muttered, as he began to give his commands. "That was a dead failure. If I hadn't been rattled that night I'd have winged that Snowflake Sam as he went through Glass Mountain Gorge; but he clattered down so sudden and so fast that I reckon I lost my head. There musn't be any slips this time!"

The sun was setting when Tiger Dan led his painted followers out of the hollow.

Then horses, which had been feeding in a grass valley beyond, were brought up and mounted, and the murderous band rode quietly in the direction of Benson's ranch.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE VENGEANCE.

There was no more peaceful scene in all the Arizona Territory than Benson's ranch that evening as the sun sank into the cloudless west.

It had been a hot day, and Benson sat on a bench at the side of the front door.

talking to the little girl, Irene. Mentally he was as much a child as she.

Orrin Jude had ridden away with the cowboys toward the south, to look after the cattle that were said to be threatened by Apache raiders.

No one dreamed, however, that there was any danger likely to come to the ranch itself.

Therefore, Huldah had not thought it amiss to absent herself from the place on that evening; and, as Benson sat talking to the child, there was no one moving about the house except Moxie Wilmot, who was doing up the evening work.

Out beyond the corral a Mexican cowboy was seen chasing a vicious pony. This was, with Moxie's movements, the only thing to disturb the quiet.

The peace of the evening had entered the heart of the Ranch King and carried him back to days that were dead.

"You don't remember much about your maw, Irene?" he asked, stroking the child's abundant hair. "You was too little when she died. I'll never forget it, though. It was the mountain fever that killed her!"

She looked up and saw the tears in his eyes, and her own filled.

"When the sun goes down like that, without a cloud, shinin' up between them two peaks like it was lightin' the very gate of heaven, I wonder sometimes if that ain't the way it looks where she is; fer if there was ever a good woman, Irene, it was your maw!"

She clung to his hand as he looked out into the gleaming sky where the sun was sinking; but she said nothing, for a childish intuition told her that words were not wanted at that moment.

And then the brightness died out, the fire on the peaks faded slowly, the shadows filled the valleys and climbed up the hills; and night was at hand.

And the painted murderers, sent by the man who had called Benson father and who professed love and filial affection, crept nearer, like desert wolves, waiting the moment to strike.

Benson still sat on the bench by the door, staring into the shadows, as if he saw beyond them into another world; and the child still clung to his hand, while Moxie, having set the lights to going in the ranch house, sung as she went about her work, and the Mexican cowboy at the corral, having subdued the fractious broncho, smoked cigarettes in peace.

Then rifles blazed out of the thickening gloom, Apache cries shrilled on the air, and the trampling of ponies was heard.

Benson leaped to his feet.

Seizing the child, he pushed her back into the house; then grasped a rifle which stood by the door.

A thatched mud hut, which a Mexican cowboy had erected for his personal use beyond the corral, blazed up at that moment, having been set on fire by one of the raiders.

By means of its light three or four Indian forms were seen riding and yelling around a huddled group of ponies, waving their blankets in an effort to make the ponies stampede.

The firing of that thatch was not a wise thing for the raiders, for a bullet from the ranchman's rifle caught one of the pretended Apaches between the shoulders at that moment and wounded him so badly that he had all he could do to cling to his mount.

Again the rifles blazed out of the darkness in front of the house, and the ranchman, who had run out into the yard, fell to the ground.

Irene saw this and screamed out in fright.

Seeing that the ranchman had fallen, some of the pretended Apaches dashed into the yard; and one of them, picking up the child, threw her across a horse and carried her away.

It was a time of wild excitement.

The Mexican cowboy, when the first shouts rang out, drew a pistol.

But, though he made a gallant defense, he, too, was soon lying prostrate.

The ponies were stampeded, and then the miscreants began to fire the buildings, and to search through the ranch house for valuables.

Moxie Wilmot was in one of the lower rooms, half frightened to death, when she heard Irene's scream.

For one instant she did not know what to do.

Running into another room, she cautiously lifted a window and dropped to the ground outside, where she crouched in terror.

Though the darkness concealed her, the open space beyond the corral was lighted by the burning thatch, and she dimly saw the forms of the men who were trying to frighten the ponies.

Trembling in every fiber of her being, she crouched there like an animal at bay; and then, seeing a stack of boards some yards away, she crawled to it on her hands and knees.

The boards had been piled in a loose heap; and she remembered that there was a hole in the heap, into which she might crawl with some hope of concealing herself.

If the ranch building was burned she would, no doubt, be discovered. But her experience and what she had heard of Apaches told her that these raiders would not tarry long.

She succeeded in reaching the board piles without discovery and in crawling into the hole.

She heard the miscreants enter the house and ransack it for valuables.

Then—and she gave a start which would have betrayed her had any one been standing near—she heard them come out of the house and talk in English!

She knew, from that instant, that they were not Apaches, but disguised white men.

What they said told her that Benson and the Mexican cowboy were dead.

"It's funny there ain't no more here! I reckon the thing was worked so slick that all of 'em was drawed away!"

The remark did not escape her. She treasured it for future study and investigation.

The man who had caught up Irene, gave her into the arms of Tiger Dan shortly afterward.

Tiger Dan looked down into the child's scared face with a grin of pleasure.

"Benson's little gal, eh? Wild Kate'll like this! What's yer name?"

Irene tried to answer, but broke down in choking sobs.

"That's all right! You'll talk after while! I'm glad you're Benson's child. I don't reckon they's anything that could tickle Wild Kate better. Hyer!"

The last was to one of his men who was passing.

When the man rode up, he put Irene into his arms.

"Look after her and treat her right. She's Benson gal. Her dad's gone under. It's been a big night fer us!"

Then he rode toward the ranch building, which his men were searching and which one of them was trying to set on fire.

As he did so, he passed the prostrate form of the Ranch King and looked at it with a scowl.

He stopped his pony for an instant; then rode on.

"No one else in the house, eh?"

He entered the building himself and appropriated such things as struck his fancy.

Fifteen minutes later the pretended Apaches vanished into the darkness out of which they had come, leaving blood and fire behind them.

CHAPTER IX.

A DREADFUL SCENE.

The red light against the sky, made by the burning buildings on Benson's ranch, was seen by Orrin Jude and his followers, and turned them back when they were not over twenty miles away.

"That's either at our place or at Taylor's," said Orrin, studying the sky. "Anyway, the cattle and the Apaches can go hang till we find out!"

Thereupon there was mounting in hot haste, and the cowboy band, with Orrin Jude at its head, raced through the darkness.

Taylor's ranch was almost in line with that of Benson, and at Taylor's ranch there was a fandango that night which Huldah had been enjoying.

And at that very moment she and others were studying the red light on the sky with much concern, and wondering what it meant.

There was another at Taylor's ranch, attending the fandango, and that one was Arthur Benson.

He had come in after dark, by himself, and had at once made his presence known to her.

Now he stood at her side, as she and others speculated on the meaning of the red light.

"Do you suppose it can be a fire at our place?" she gasped, horrified by the thought.

The cowboys, who had been immensely enjoying the dance, streamed out, followed by the fiddlers.

"I reckon this breaks up the fandango," remarked one of the cowboys. "We oughtn't stay hyer, I allow, when mebbe that's a fire where we're needed!"

This being the common sentiment, the fandango came to an end, and the cowboys ran to get out their horses.

A few moments later they were galloping furiously toward the burning buildings.

And behind them thundered the cowboys, led by Orrin Jude.

To Huldah it was a terrible ride, with the fear on her of she knew not what!

There was no doubt that the fire was no accident when the place was reached; for, as they swept by the corral, the dead body of the Mexican cowboy was seen.

But when the front of the house was gained, the form of the Ranch King was not visible, though, of course, its absence did not attract their attention, for they did not know it had lain there.

Then Miss Moxie crawled out of the pile of boards. She was still trembling with fear and half crazy from what she had seen and heard.

The cowboys gathered questioningly about her, even though some of the out-buildings were burning and needed their attention.

The dastardly attempt to fire the main building of the ranch had failed. The fire had flamed up at first, but had gone out.

Moxie looked into the faces about her as if not yet assured of her safety.

"It was awful!" she said. "They were painted like Apaches, but they were white men. They shot Mr. Benson and Calisto, the Mexican, and they carried Irene away with them. I hid under the boards."

Suddenly Huldah leaped to her feet from the saddle, her face white and her eyes shining.

"Where is my father? Show me his body, if he is dead! If it isn't here we must find it!"

"They shot him down right there!" Moxie volunteered. "I seen him fall. After that I run and hid."

Huldah leaped to the point indicated; and there, going down on her hands and knees, saw that the soil and grass was damp with blood.

"It is father's blood! We must find him!"

Arthur had approached, and she clutched him by the shoulder in a way to make him wince.

"And Irene?" Moxie reminded.

"We must find them both! Don't let the cowboys lose any time. Hurry them in the work."

"They are doing as well as if I was at their heels ordering them!" said Arthur, who was not at all anxious for haste. "We will follow and rescue Irene! As for father!"

His tone and his lugubrious sigh told Huldah that he had no hope that Benson was alive.

The fire was subdued after a time, and the cowboys found the trail left by the raiders.

They were about to get together to pursue it, when galloping horses were heard, and a few minutes later Orrin Jude and his followers rode up like the wind.

Orrin Jude heard the story with a grave and anxious face.

Then he leaped down and took a look around, and closely examined the grass.

"Pards, Moxie is right! This hyer wasn't done by 'Paches, but by white men!"

CHAPTER X.

SNOWFLAKE TO THE FORE.

There was another who saw the light on the night sky.

Snowflake Sam, who was returning from a hasty horseback trip to Flagstaff, drew rein in the edge of the pine woods and stared in almost speechless fear.

He knew at once what had happened. The blow which had been threatened, and which he had not expected to fall for two or three days yet, had been given.

"My God! I've delayed criminally!"

The trip to Flagstaff had been made for the purpose of thwarting the plans of Arthur Benson and Tiger Dan; but it was an effort wasted.

He did not linger in the pines, but spurred the broncho into a gallop and raced toward the burning buildings as the cowboys had done, though from a different direction.

When he reached the ranch house he found Orrin Jude just concluding his inspection of the hoof marks and footprints on the grass, and heard him declare that the crime was the work of white men.

Near the door stood Moxie and Huldah, with Arthur Benson. Arthur was endeavoring to comfort Huldah, without giving her hope concerning her father.

A fierce pang stabbed Snowflake's heart as his eyes fell on the group. A hot impulse to rush on this man and shoot him dead filled his breast.

This was no time for feuds; and, springing out of the saddle, he stepped up and made his presence known.

Though Arthur started at Snowflake's voice, he maintained perfect calmness and acquainted Sam with what had taken place.

As he talked, Sam was plucked by the sleeve, and, turning about, looked into the eyes of Orrin Jude.

Something there made him follow Orrin without hesitation.

"It was white devils done this! We're goin' to foller 'em! I'd like to have you go with us. I believe you're a man to tie to! They was painted up like 'Paches, and there air other things that makes the business look queer, and I'm goin' to git at the bottom of it!"

And the glare in his eyes showed the intensity of his rage against the assassins.

Snowflake Sam was with him, of course.

"Count me in, Orrin, even to the death!" was his impressive response.

"I knowed you'd be! The boys air gittin' ready. We'll be off soon."

A few moments later Orrin was seen addressing Moxie.

"I don't know why I say so," he whispered, "but I say fer you to keep your eyes on Arthur Benson. This whole business is mighty curious."

He turned to Snowflake Sam.

"Air you ready?"

"Ready!"

"Then we're off!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE TIGER'S LAIR.

Not many miles from the ranch, but nearer Glass Mountain than the ranch, was a wild region of rocky slopes and

lava hills, with awful depths and swimming declivities; and within this region Tiger Dan Almack had his stronghold.

A plain, studded with pine trees and lava crags, stretched around the tiger's lair. For homes, he and his band had a number of rough log cabins that were well fitted for defense; and to make the place more secure, a strong wall, that was half palisade and half logs reclining, was placed about it.

It was difficult of approach, and its position gave it a commanding view of the plain that led up to it. From the rear it was unassailable, for great crags lifted themselves there, forbidding any one from coming near from that direction.

Within this stronghold, waking from a sleep of exhaustion, Irene Benson opened her eyes on the morning following the raid on the ranch.

She had been brought straight to that point by Tiger Dan's men; and, though so terribly frightened, the wearing character of the ride had caused her to fall asleep, and her slumber had been so deep that she had not even aroused when she was put down on a cot in the corner of the cabin.

As she opened her eyes now and looked over her strange surroundings, her mind filled with terror as memory returned concerning the things that had occurred in the night.

She had seen her father shot down; she had heard Moxie scream; she had beheld the firing of the buildings.

Though it was all like a horrid nightmare, she knew it was true.

She had not been undressed; and now, as she got out of the cot, she started toward the door, when she was confronted by a woman whose fiendish aspect drove her back in fright.

The woman stood in the doorway, completely filling it, and glared at the child with devilish malignity.

"So you're Benson's child! Ho, ho! Well, I've been wantin' to git even with Benson fer a good while! What do you want fer your breakfast? Don't look at me that way! I'm not goin' to p'izen ye!"

Irene had retreated to the cot, from which point she surveyed the woman with more perturbation than ever.

"Is Bill Benson your pa?"

"Yes!" Irene gasped.

"All right, then. How old air ye?"

"Nine."

"I feel like I'm ninety, but I ain't the half of it! I'm Wild Kate! You'll know me better when you've seen me more. Tiger Dan's my old man. You've heard of Tiger Dan?"

The child shrunk against the cot.

These indications of fear pleased the woman. Coming close up to Irene, she thrust her ugly, crime-seamed face against the pure, sweet one of the child and hissed:

"I'm goin' to be yer mammy fer awhile, an' I'm goin' to make ye mind me, er I'll whip ye."

She grabbed her by the hand, and jerked her with her out of the room, grinning evilly, when the tightness of the touch and the roughness of her manner made Irene cry out in fright and pain.

The bountiful breakfast which the child expected proved to be a cup of water and some bits of hard bread.

Tiger Dan came up as she was eating. He looked at Wild Kate and she looked at him, and then they stood side by side and surveyed the child.

"That would please our friend, Arthur Benson, if he could see it. Aha! Arthur Benson! A good joke! Don't you think we'd better try to raise her to become a model woman like you, Kate? Then, when we've educated her and give her all the frills and furbelows of this here high callin' which we foller, we could take her back to her dad—"

"But he's dead!" Kate interjected.

Irene started up with a cry as the bitter knowledge was brought so cruelly home to her. The cry made Wild Kate laugh again.

"Yes, the old Ranch King's dead, and we're done with him, and soon Arthur will marry his heir, and then we'll have the swing of this whole country out hyer without any one to give us trouble!"

He went away, after making this declaration, and when the child had eaten the bread furnished her she was led by the old woman back to the cabin.

Here she was kept as a prisoner for a whole day, without seeing any one else.

But the next morning there came into the cabin a woman whom she had never beheld; a woman who was under twenty-five years of age, and possessed considerable comeliness in spite of her surroundings.

She came close up to the child, who, through fear, had retreated again to the cot.

"I want to be your friend, little girl. You'll find that I'll be a good friend to you, too; for I know that you're needin' that kind of a friend here. My name is Moll Almack."

Her kind words won Irene's heart immediately, and they were beginning to talk in a cheery manner when the door was pushed rudely in and Wild Kate appeared.

Kate's anger immediately flamed out. "What—"

"I'm not a tiger if I am a tiger's daughter!" Moll Almack declared, with a stern resolution that made Wild Kate stare and retreat.

But when Moll Almack went away, Wild Kate was harsher than before to the child.

"Moll!"

Moll Almack was going again toward the cabin that constituted the child's prison, when her name was called, and she stopped.

It had grown dark, and out of the darkness there came a bearded man, who was apparently past middle age.

He was known to the band as Mad Charley, though his madness consisted only in an undue degree of recklessness in times of danger.

Moll left the path and stood with him beneath a pine.

"I've been watching what's going on here, and I see that you're gettin' ready for a lot of trouble. Tiger Dan's not been handsome to me to-day, and I'm thinkin' more and more of cuttin' out of here!"

He had evidently spoken to her on the subject before, as her answer showed:

"But the child! I can't go now!"

"This is no place for you. As for the child, don't you suppose we could take her along?"

"I'm afraid to try it, Charlie. It would be terrible fer all of us if we should be caught. I couldn't think of riskin' it with her!"

"But you will go with me soon?"

"Anywhere in the world, Charlie, when the time comes. I don't think the time's come yet. I'm as anxious as you air to git out o' this place."

He kissed her, and then permitted her to go on toward the house.

CHAPTER XII.

QUEER BUSINESS.

Reaching it, she pushed the door in without ceremony and entered.

Wild Kate had the child by the arm and was drawing her toward her with one hand, while the other held a strap.

A blur of blood filled the eyes of the enraged young woman. With a wild cry she rushed across the room, and grasping Kate by the hair, pushed her back and threw her against the cot.

Then she stood before her mother with flashing eyes.

A candle, which burnt on a board in the corner, showed to Wild Kate the features of her daughter, transformed by anger into those of a fiend.

As soon as released, the child shrunk against the opposite wall.

Moll Almack stepped to her, and, taking her by the hand, drew her protectingly toward the door.

Wild Kate sprang up from the cot and darted toward them.

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that you shan't beat this child any more!"

Moll Almack closed the door and put the child behind her.

"Listen to me! I know all about that last money you hid from paw! I know where you put it! If you crowd me I'll tell him everything. I'll tell him, too, about the time you got mad at him and threatened to go to Flagstaff and reveal this place to the officers!"

Wild Kate fell back with a stare of fear.

"You won't dare—"

"I dare to do anything when I'm roused. I tell you I'm not going to see this child abused any more. Anyhow, I'll not see her beat as if she was a log of wood! Now, shall I take her out with me, or will you leave the cabin?"

Wild Kate hesitated for an instant; then she spoke, in tones much subdued:

"I'll leave the cabin; but I know you won't dare tell what you're threatenin'. Tiger Dan wouldn't believe you, if you did!"

Moll Almack drew the door open and stood aside to let her pass.

When she was gone, and it seemed certain that none of the outlaws were coming to investigate the outcries, Moll sat down on the cot by the side of the girl and talked to her in a way to soothe her fears.

"I'm goin' out an' I'm goin' to bring you something to eat!"

She left the child thus, but she returned in a few minutes with a bountiful supper.

After Irene had eaten and her fears had subsided sufficiently to permit her to go to bed, Moll Almack left the cabin and went in search of Tiger Dan.

Moll feared her father as she did not fear her mother, and she trembled a little, for he looked at her harshly, as they drew aside together.

She told of the child and of what had occurred that evening, closing with the declaration that she hoped he would stand by her in seeing that the child was not abused.

A bitter growl came from his lips.

"Let Wild Kate alone! She knows what she's doin'! She always makes a good second to Tiger Dan, and as for that child—well, it's Benson's!"

The very bitterness with which the name was pronounced showed how he hated the memory of Benson and how cruel he would be to all who were in any way related to the ranchman. Plainly, it was useless to appeal to him in behalf of the child against Wild Kate.

Moll Almack turned away, a hidden fire in her eyes.

She was thinking more than ever of what Mad Charlie had said to her; and was wondering if, after all, it was not the best thing for her to do—to run away with him from the outlaw camp and take the child with them. Mad Charlie was courageous and shrewd, and he was not likely to fail in what he undertook.

Nevertheless, discovery might mean death to all of them, and it certainly would not help the cause of Irene.

She thought of going in search of Mad Charlie to talk the subject over with him again, when an outlaw rushed into the camp, his teeth in a chatter.

Another followed him.

They were the guards who had been stationed at a point a fourth of a mile beyond the camp; and, when Tiger Dan beheld them, he confronted them with an oath.

"D'ye know what this means?"

It was one of the rules of the outlaw band that whoever deserted his post should be shot, unless he could show abundant justification.

"A spirit!" one of them gasped.

"A ghost!" said the other.

Tiger Dan turned pale, for he was as superstitious as any there.

"Where was it? What did it look like?"

"It was a fiery face, shinin' on us frum the top of that lava ridge jist tother side of our post. It showed up there all of a suddint, an' then it floated along as if it was comin' toward us; an' we cut out!"

"An' didn't it have any body?"

"Nothin' a-tall but a fiery face!"

Moll Almack saw the crowd and heard something of the confusion, and arrived in time to hear a portion of the man's explanation. She felt her hand pressed, and then saw that Mad Charlie was at her side.

The story of the ghostly visitant caused her heart to beat and her eyes to enlarge.

"If it's a ghost," she whispered to Mad Charlie, "it's the ghost of that ranchman they killed out on the Carbinero a month ago."

"Or the ghost of that other ranchman, Bill Benson!" Charley suggested, looking down into her face, which he saw was agitated.

Tiger Dan thought also of the ranchman killed on the Carbinero, and of that other ranchman killed more recently, with other murders he had committed within the year, and his heart quaked.

"It was as much like moonlight as like fire," said one of the guard. "And at first I thought it was the moon shinin' up there!—when I got my first squint at it!"

Tiger Dan looked around on the assembled outlaws. While thinking this might be a spirit, he was not unaware of the fact that constant peril surrounded him and that they were in especial danger at this time by reason of the cowboys who were known to be pursuing.

The fact that no one had ever been able to follow their trail across the lava slopes had made him somewhat careless; but he recognized, now, that it was possible the feat had been performed. The cowboys from Benson's might be even at the very gates of the stronghold!

"There's got to be guards out there! Who of you will volunteer to take the place?"

There was always some extra recompense to the man who showed superior courage, and on this Tiger Dan counted; but just then there seemed to be no one wanting this reward.

No one moved, and the outlaw chief repeated his question.

An Irishman with a fiery face pushed forward, Tim Doolihan by name.

"Oi'm not wantin' to see anny koin of sperrits 'ceptin' av thim that come in a bottle!" he grinned. "An' if I faces the wan, Oi reckon I'll have to have a swally av the other!"

Tim Doolihan's offer was accepted with eagerness. He was known to be a reckless rascal, fearing neither man, beast nor devil.

With a bottle of whisky to strengthen his courage, and a loaded Winchester in his hands, Tim Doolihan walked out to the station, from whence the recreant guards had fled in fright at sight of that shining face, and there sat down.

"Oi'll have me fill av good whisky fer wanst, if Oi'm killt the next minit," he muttered, pointing the bottom of the bottle at the sky and letting a goodly portion of its contents slip, gurglingly, down his throat. "Ah, Oi'd foight all the ghosts in Arizony fer a taste av mount-ain dew loike thot!"

Then he held his rifle between his knees and stared steadfastly at the top of the ridge where the shining face was said to have been seen.

CHAPTER XIII.

SNOWFLAKE SAM IN THE TOILS.

Tiger Dan, when the new guard had departed, went through the camp, seeing that everything was secure against an attack and assuring all with whom he talked that, although he did not know what it was the "boys" had seen, he was sure it could not be a ghost, for the reason that there were no such things.

But many of his followers remembered the look that had shone in his face when

the startling news was brought to him, and they said among themselves that the old man was "whistling to keep his courage up!"

Tiger Dan was undeniably nervous. He walked round and round the palisaded wall, to make sure there were no weak points in it, going back and forth over the same ground two or three times.

Then he heard a pebble drop rattlingly behind him, and turned to see what it meant.

Although the spot was dark, he saw something white; and, going back to it, he picked up a folded piece of paper, that was tied to a stone.

He could not imagine where it had come from, unless from over the wall; and if from over the wall, it probably indicated enemies.

But why should enemies announce their approach in that manner?

Thrilled with the excitement of the moment, after looking cautiously all round he walked back toward the cabins, asking every one he met for Mad Charlie.

Mad Charlie, who had been having another talk with Moll Almack, heard his name called by Tiger Dan and came forward.

Tiger Dan stopped in a doorway, where the light of a lamp shone, and, pulling the paper open, looked at it.

It held writing, and he could not read. Most of his followers were quite as ignorant. Mad Charlie was the scholar of the camp.

Charlie took the paper from Tiger Dan's hands and glanced it over. He gave a start, which, however, Tiger Dan did not observe. Then he studied the characters closely, after which he turned the paper over and over in his fingers.

"This is mighty queer business!" he asserted. "It don't say a thing!"

"Don't say a thing! Ain't that writin'?"

"It's jist marks and dashes, with a letter stuck here and there. There ain't a word spelled out in it. Where'd you git it?"

Tiger Dan explained in a few words how he had found it.

"That bangs me! I thought I could read writin'. Better have Holliston to look at it. He can read pretty well. And, then, there's Mike Taylor!"

The two men were sent for, and when they came into the cabin into which Charlie and Tiger Dan retired the paper was shown to them, and they were asked to read what was on it.

They studied it in stupid amazement, and both said, as Mad Charlie had said, that the thing was not readable.

Tiger Dan was sorely puzzled. He was more than puzzled—he was made afraid. This thing, coming on top of the sight of that shining face! What did it mean?

He did not know, and no one could tell him.

Mad Charlie tucked the paper into his pocket.

"Let me have the thing to puzzle over. I used to think I could read anything. If it's any kind of writin', from Cherokee to Chineese, I'll make it out, yit!"

Tiger Dan was a man quick to act.

That piece of paper told him that enemies—or an enemy—had gained the walls.

It was possible, he thought, that an enemy had scaled the wall, and that the paper with the bit of stone tied to it had been dropped by accident as he was scudding away.

Tiger Dan called to two of his best men, and with them slipped outside the barricade.

Then they crept close along the walls to a point opposite that where the letter had been found.

Discovering nothing there, they moved farther, and finally crouched in a lava depression at a place where they had a fair view of the general outline of the stronghold.

Lying there in ambush, they heard a man move. They also heard him speak in a low tone, and at first were inclined

to think he was talking to some one on the other side of the wall.

Tiger Dan started in rage and fear, for this indicated that treachery was afoot, and that some one within the stronghold was communicating to this man outside.

However, after events removed this idea from his mind.

The man turned and came toward them. He moved cautiously along, though he did not seem to fear a trap of the kind set for him.

He came straight toward the depression; and, when his feet were on the very verge of it, Tiger Dan and his followers leaped out on him and bore him to the earth.

Tiger Dan tried to keep him from uttering a cry, but was unable to do so, and a loud warning went up from the man's lips.

"Stow that, curse ye!" Tiger Dan snarled, getting his rough fingers on the man's throat, and squeezing till the man's voice died away in a gurgle. "If ye try that ag'in I'll choke the life out of you!"

He held the man down thus, and his followers bound the captive's hands and feet with clever deftness, in spite of the flailing legs.

When this had been done and the man was helpless as a log, the outlaws squatted in the darkness, waiting to learn the result of the cry that had been sent forth.

Perfect silence reigned without the stronghold, though there was an evident movement within, showing that the call had reached the ears of the people there.

"They'll make a mess of it, if I don't git back!" Tiger Dan thought, and then he commanded that the captive should be carried into the camp.

The burly fellows picked the stranger up and carried him inside.

Then a light was flashed in his face.

The prisoner was Snowflake Sam!

Snowflake Sam, as soon as he was freed so that he could sit up and look about him, stared curiously into the faces of his captors.

He saw no pity in them.

He resolved on a bold front.

"I don't know who you are," looking at Tiger Dan, who, by appearances, he knew to be the chief, "but I know you have in this place the child of Bill Benson, the Ranch King. I didn't come here alone, as you may readily guess. We succeeded in doing something that's never before been done—tracking you to your home!"

"But we'll go away—and on that I pledge you my word of honor—if you will release me and give up the child.

"If you refuse, you'll only seal your doom, for you can't escape the men who followed me across these mesas. You may kill me, but that won't do you any good!"

"That's all right, my fine feller! I reckon if we kill you the world'll come to an end. We ain't keerin'! Let 'er come!"

Tiger Dan was equal to the best when it came to a game of bluff.

CHAPTER XIV.

SNOWFLAKE SAM'S DESPERATE DASH.

Snowflake Sam saw that he could expect no mercy. Fear of those who were outside might keep the outlaws from slaying him for a time, but the chances were that, if worst came to worst, he would be shot through very fiendishness.

Tiger Dan did not waste much time parleying with him and swapping threats.

Giving Snowflake into the hands of reliable men, he strengthened his guards and quietly sent out a small force to scout around and determine the position and number of the cowboys. Then he began to lay plans to fall on and annihilate them.

Snowflake Sam assumed a jocular and fearless manner, though he found it hard to disguise the deep anxiety he

felt for himself and for the child, whose rescue had caused him to run so great a risk.

His hands and feet were tied, and he was placed on the ground not a great distance from the entrance.

This entrance was a rude gateway, where a sentinel stood, with ready rifle.

He was not left there long, but was tumbled into one of the cabins that stood by.

There he was left alone.

He could soon tell there was considerable excitement outside, and not many seconds elapsed before he heard the voice of a man and woman talking in low tones near the cabin door.

They were Mad Charley and Moll Almack.

He thrilled strangely and tried to roll in that direction. Once he opened his lips, as if he had thoughts of calling out to them.

But at that juncture he heard outlaws come through the gateway, which checked the impulse; and shortly afterward the man and woman walked away.

That writhing movement toward the door had, however, furnished him a hopeful discovery. He could move with greater freedom than he had imagined, and the cords on his wrists were not drawn as tightly as he had thought.

He sat up in the darkness and began to tug at the cords. His hands were tied behind his back, so that it was impossible to apply his teeth to the knots.

Nevertheless, he persisted, and soon had the satisfaction of feeling the knots yield.

Then he tugged and groaned and writhed and twisted, till the sweat stood out on his face in great drops, so desperately determined was he to escape; and, when it seemed that he could not exert another ounce of strength and that the cords would literally cut through the muscles and sever the arteries of the wrists, the knots parted with a suddenness that threw him to the floor.

He lay there panting, and yet almost fearing to breathe lest he should provoke a discovery; while he heard men passing to and fro in front of the cabin door.

When he had somewhat regained his strength and wind he attacked the bonds on his feet, and, being able to use his fingers, soon had his limbs free.

Then, with the stealthy caution of a cat, he crept to the door.

It stood half open, and he ventured to peer out.

Seeing that no one was guarding the cabin, he dropped out on the ground and writhed silently along in the shadows.

There he lay for a few moments, watching the gateway in the palisaded wall and the form of the sentinel who stood by it with a rifle in his hands.

Then he saw another form moving but a few yards away, and later he heard a woman's voice.

The form was that of Moll Almack, and she was now talking in low tones to the sentry, questioning him about what was going on outside.

If Snowflake Sam could have known of Moll Almack's kindness to Irene, his heart would have warmed to her and he might have endeavored to make his presence and his plans known to her.

He tried to hear what the subject of the conversation was, but only heard something that seemed to indicate she was going out through the gate.

A sudden idea struck him, and he writhed back into the cabin.

Diving into the inner pocket of his coat, he uttered a grunt of satisfaction, and drew out a flat box, which he quickly opened.

It contained a phosphoric preparation.

Some of this he applied to his face. It shone in the darkness in a dull and unearthly way. Here was the spirit face seen by the frightened guards!

"It's a good thing they didn't find

that stuff. They were too much excited to make a search, but were satisfied when they had taken my weapons. I reckon just now this is worth more than a revolver!"

Creeping to the door, he drew out a red handkerchief, tore holes in it and twisted it into a mask, which he applied to his face for the purpose of hiding the phosphorescent glow until he was ready to reveal it.

Then he again dropped through the doorway to the ground and crawled cautiously along the wall in the direction of the gateway.

Moll Almack was coming toward him and only a yard or two away, and the sentinel was parading up and down in front of the gate, with rifle in readiness.

"Shall I, or shall I not?"

He stared at Moll Almack through the holes in the mask. She, all unaware of his presence, came straight on.

He was thinking that it might be profitable to seize Moll Almack, drag her through the gateway with him, and, if he succeeded in getting away from the place with her, hold her as a hostage for the safety of Irene.

It was a daring plan, but Snowflake Sam was in a daring and desperate mood just then. He knew that Moll Almack was the daughter of Tiger Dan; for words he had overheard since being made a prisoner had informed him of that fact.

He crouched like a tiger as she came straight on toward him. Then he tore away the handkerchief, leaped forward and seized her, and made a dive for the gateway.

Moll Almack gave a cry of fright, which drew the attention of the guard.

He wheeled suddenly about; then fell back, with a startled cry. That shining face took all the courage out of his heart.

He echoed the cry of Moll Almack, and, dropping his gun, fled wildly through the gateway out into the darkness beyond.

Moll Almack uttered another scream, so loud and piercing that it aroused every one within the stronghold.

But before the alarmed outlaws could reach the gateway, Snowflake Sam had disappeared with the daughter of Tiger Dan.

CHAPTER XV.

MAD CHARLIE RUNS INTO A LARIAT.

But for the fact that she was so paralyzed by terror, Moll Almack would never have suffered herself to be dragged out through the gateway in that manner. She would have fought like a tigress. But now she swooned dead away, after uttering that second cry, and lay in the arms of Snowflake Sam as limp as a rag.

Moll Almack was no light weight, and only a man of superb muscle could have lifted and carried her in that manner. Snowflake Sam bore her as if she were no heavier than a child.

He was right at the heels of the scared guard; and the latter, looking back, grew more frightened than ever, and, losing his footing, tumbled in a heap.

His rifle clattered away over the stones and was discharged, adding to the confusion and excitement.

Before the guard could quite recover his senses and his feet, Snowflake Sam had disappeared around a rocky turn.

Hearing the exclamations within the stronghold, the guard scrambled up, his teeth chattering with terror, and, securing his rifle, turned back.

His fears now took a new turn. He had deserted his post, and that was a thing Tiger Dan seldom tolerated.

However, he managed to get back to the gateway before Tiger Dan appeared.

As the outlaws came rushing to him with wondering inquiries, followed by Tiger Dan, he began to stammer out his story, to the great bewilderment of the outlaws, who were ready to stampede.

An excited scare followed, but when

the discovery was quickly made that the prisoner was gone, Tiger Dan began to put two and two together, and arrived at the conclusion that perhaps the "spirit" had a good deal of flesh and blood about it, after all.

The discovery created a great sensation.

Tiger Dan, unwilling to let any one else lead in such an investigation, took a man or two and slipped outside.

He remained outside a half hour or more, but was unable to see or hear anything. Though convinced now that enemies were near, perhaps lurking under the very shadows of the palisaded walls, he could not detect their presence.

He came back much depressed. No word had been heard from Moll Almack. She had gone with that fiery face out into the darkness—that was all.

Tiger Dan found it impossible to make his men believe that the occurrence had nothing supernatural about it.

The guard had done a good deal of talking during Tiger Dan's absence. The oftener he repeated his story, the more his imagination enlarged its details. Now he claimed that the spirit consisted only of a shining face, which, by some strange magnetism, drew Moll Almack along unresistingly, and that while he saw her struggling and heard her scream, it was as if she were struggling with the strange impulse that made her follow the shining face out into the unknown.

The natural effect of such stories was to throw the outlaws into a panic.

Tiger Dan realized the demoralizing effect of what was being done, and talked sharply to the trembling guard. Then he went about declaring that he had discovered "sign" which told him that the "spirit" was none other than the escaping prisoner.

The story of Moll Almack being carried away in that fashion most singularly affected her lover, Mad Charley.

He presented himself before Tiger Dan, a queer light in his eyes.

"Just a word with you!"

His tone caused Tiger Dan to grant the request.

Together they went into a cabin.

"You know that I love Moll, and that some of these times we intend to get married? I want permission to follow her. I'm not afraid of spirits or of devils, when it comes to that!"

"You want to go alone?"

"Yes—a lot of fellows would just hammer me!"

Wild Kate came to the door and clamored for admission.

"Do you intend to let Moll be kerried off in that way 'thout goin' after her?" she screeched.

"Mad Charley's goin'!"

"Thank you!" and Mad Charley put a hand on the knob.

"Hold on! You know that it's the cowboys from Benson's who air layin' round out there? I don't understand why they haven't made a break. They don't generally hang back!"

It was a puzzling thing. But the cowboys were "hanging back" because they did not want to imperil the life of Irene in making an assault. For that reason, Snowflake Sam had risked so much to get Irene out of the place.

Tiger Dan, in granting this permission to Mad Charley, was quite as anxious to fathom the mystery of the shining face, and to learn what the cowboys were doing and where they were, as to effect the rescue of Moll.

Mad Charley lost no time in making preparations, and was soon outside, moving along with practiced stealth.

Knowing the formation of the country thoroughly, he arrived at certain conclusions as to the location of the force of Snowflake Sam, and moved in that direction, but he had not gone two hundred yards when something whizzed toward him from behind a boulder and he felt a rope tighten about his neck.

He drew a knife and put up a hand to keep the rope from choking him, and with the intention of cutting it, but before the hand got as high as the chin, the rope was fiercely jerked, and Mad Charley was thrown heavily forward on his face.

The fall and the choking rendered him half unconscious; and, before he recovered, a man was astride of his back and a threatening voice growled:

"No monkeyin', pardner, when yer uncle's got the reins."

The voice and the rope belonged to Orrin Jude.

When Snowflake Sam slipped into the shadow of the wall and was captured, Orrin Jude was close behind him. Orrin was near, too, when Snowflake made that desperate dash for freedom, and Snowflake being now safe from present pursuit, Orrin had been again watching the stronghold at the moment Mad Charley emerged from it.

Mad Charley was aroused by the voice, and tried to squirm from under Orrin's knees; but that was not an easy thing to do, as he soon found, and before he knew it his hands and feet were caught in nooses, which, tightening, rendered him helpless.

He had not thought to cry out. Now, as if fearing he might, Orrin clicked a revolver threateningly and pressed the cold muzzle against Mad Charley's temple.

"No monkey business, as I said! I'm goin' to let yer feet free, and you've got to walk ahead of me till I say stop. If you don't, you'll everlastingly wish that you had!"

He pulled the revolvers from over Mad Charley's hips and the knife from his belt, and then slipped the cords off his ankles.

"You're a cool head!" Mad Charley admitted.

"I've been ropin' steers an' road-agents fer the best part of twenty years. You've heern of me likely! I'm Orrin Jude, the Rope King—foreman at Benson's ranch! I drink rattlesnake juice fer my licker and eat bowie knives regular fer my vittles! When I open my mouth and holler, the people up in Flagstaff telegraph to the New York newspapers that there's been an earthquake in Arizona!"

"You can blow your own horn!"

"Thankee! I've been blowin' it ever sence I was born, 'thout much help frum outsiders! Now, git a move on ye!"

He half lifted Mad Charley to his feet and set him in motion, touching the back of Charley's head now and then with the muzzle of the revolver to make him docile and obedient, and thus drove him to the point where the body of the cowboys lay in hiding, waiting with impatience the moment to strike.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAD CHARLEY'S SECRET.

The bringing in of this prisoner caused a sensation among the cowboys.

They were ensconced behind a jutting spur of the lava mountain, in a friendly and concealing niche, and had been lying there in total darkness. Mad Charley did not know he was among them until some one spoke, addressing Orrin Jude.

Then the slide of a dark lantern was slipped and its light was thrown into his face.

This was followed by an exclamation in the voice of Snowflake Sam.

Though his eyes were blinded by the light, Mad Charley's ears were keenly alert, and he turned eagerly toward this voice, also uttering an exclamation.

"Bring him further back in the cleft, boys," Snowflake Sam ordered.

He took the lantern in his own hand and set it on a ledge where its light illuminated the group.

Mad Charley had been listening eagerly for another voice, which he now heard—the voice of Moll Almack.

She was a prisoner there, but not

bound; and he now saw her as well as heard her, for the light revealed her at the further side of the cleft, where she had been sitting as if in despair.

She knew now that the one who had borne her from the stronghold was not a spirit; but the knowledge did not give her confidence, though these men had from the first treated her with the utmost kindness.

She now sprang up all a-tremble, and came running toward Mad Charley, who stood, bound and helpless, staring at her.

As no one interposed, she rushed up to him, and was on the point of snapping a knife from the belt of one of the men for the purpose of cutting the cords at his wrists. Her eyes flamed with indignation and anger, and she seemed utterly fearless.

"That's all right! You may cut the cords if you want to!" said Snowflake Sam, to the great astonishment of the cowboys. "I don't think it necessary to keep this man tied up. You will give us your promise not to try to escape?"

Mad Charley looked doubtfully around the circle of suspicious faces, and quietly nodded.

"I guess you can hold 'em back, though some of yer friends hyer look as if they'd like to hack me to pieces!"

Snowflake Sam gave the girl a knife, with which she quickly and almost fiercely cut the bonds of her lover.

Then Snowflake stepped forward and whispered something to the prisoner.

Receiving from him what seemed a sign of assent, Snowflake turned about, with a smile on his face and a wave of his hand.

Orrin Jude was staring as if his eyes would pop out.

"Pards, permit me to introduce my friend, Charley Bradford, who is known, he tells me, to the gentlemen out yonder as Mad Charley. He has been herding with outlaws, but he is not one, I assure you!"

The words created a tremendous sensation.

The girl gave a stare of unbelief.

But her unbelief was quickly dissipated by Mad Charley, who acknowledged to all that Snowflake Sam was correct in his statements.

Then it was revealed that Mad Charley was no more nor less than a detective sent among the outlaws by the secret service agency, which fact had been known to Snowflake Sam, who was his friend.

Moll Almack seemed unable at first to get over the effects of this exposure. Though she had expressed a willingness to leave the outlaws for the sake of this man, it was another thing to look on him as a detective who had come into their midst for their undoing.

Mad Charley saw what was passing in her mind, and, as soon as he had finished his explanations and had opportunity, he went back with her into the recesses of the nook for the purpose of setting himself right with her.

"I've got a big story to tell you, Moll, and I don't really know whether this is the time and place for it or not. Anyway, I see I'd better heave ahead, for you are beginning to doubt me and to question if you really care anything for me.

"I did come into this section for the purpose of getting into the band of Tiger Dan, that I might bring about his overthrow. I have been working all along to that end. The revelation came sooner to you than I thought it would, but it could not have been delayed much longer.

"And now let me tell you something that I don't think you know yourself! You're not the daughter of Tiger Dan and Wild Kate!"

She stepped back with an exclamation of surprise and doubt.

"I know it is true, because I overheard Tiger Dan and Wild Kate say so, one night when they were talking about you. I don't doubt that before we get

out of this country you'll be able to hear them say so, too. This revelation is also a little premature, but it, too, was bound to come."

"Then whose daughter am I?" she gasped.

"You are the daughter of John Alderman, a ranchman, who was killed by Tiger Dan and some of his followers, down in the Mogollon country, a number of years ago. The murder was for money, and you, who were left, was taken by Tiger Dan and brought up by him!"

"It's all a strange story, but the proof can be got after awhile. In the mean time, you can think it over!"

"As for me," approaching her, "though I am not an outlaw, I am still your lover. I still love you better than my own life! And I hope you will think more of me for the very reason that I am not an outlaw, and can go out of this country with a clean record and live as an honorable man!"

She had been trying to withhold herself from him—trying to hate him for his treachery to Tiger Dan, but his words bewildered her, and the great love for him that had grown up in her heart overpowered her. She yielded to his embrace, and was won!

When Mad Charley went back to the group about the lantern with Moll Almack he found that they were already discussing a plan which contemplated his return to Tiger Dan's stronghold.

When the plan was unfolded he agreed to it.

He was to go back to the tiger's lair as if nothing had happened and tell the outlaws and Tiger Dan that his search for Moll had been a failure. Then he was to watch his opportunity to pick up Irene and get her out of the place—and, after that!—

"I can work it!" he declared.

And he slipped away.

CHAPTER XVII.

MAD CHARLEY'S HEROISM.

Mad Charley returned to Tiger Dan's stronghold with a startling story. He said he had seen the spirit face and had been frightened by it.

His words tended to throw the outlaws into a state of panic.

Tiger Dan came to him, with a grave air.

"Who did that face look like?"

Mad Charley described as nearly as possible the face of Benson, the Ranch King.

"Do you 'low it could 'a' been the ghost o' Benson?"

"I'm not sayin' what it was. I'm only tellin' you what I saw!"

"It must have been the prisoner carried away Moll!"

"Perhaps the spirit carried away Moll and released the prisoner."

Mad Charley chuckled when Tiger Dan went away, for he saw how his words had taken effect.

At the first opportunity he slipped to the cabin-prison of little Irene.

He saw that the guard was absent from the vicinity, and, when he drew near, he heard Wild Kate talking. She had been abusing the girl again, and Mad Charley's teeth closed with a vicious snap.

"The old fiend! I'd like to use that strap on her for all it's worth! She's got about as much heart as a hyena. The idea that she could be the mother of Moll! The thing is so absurd that I wonder Moll ever believed it!"

Fearing a discovery, he went away, and then watched the cabin until he saw the old woman leave it, when he returned.

He applied a key to the door and entered softly.

Irene had not got over her fright, and was still sobbing on her cot.

"Don't be afraid!" he whispered, as he stepped toward her. "I'm your friend—the best friend you've got here, since Moll went away! Wouldn't you like for me to take you away from this place?"

She had shrunk back, as if afraid, but his words reassured her.

When he saw that she was not very much frightened he stooped over and kissed her, and put his arms about her in a comforting way.

"Your friends are out there, not very far away, and I'm going to take you to them. Moll is out there, too. You'll be very quiet, won't you? And do everything I say?"

She recognized him by his voice; and the fact that she had more than once seen him talking to Moll Almack gave her confidence in him.

"I'll do just what you say, sir! And I'll walk as soft as I can. Can't you take me right now? I'm afraid she may come back!"

"She'll not come back right away. Better climb up here in my arms till we get out of the house."

Then he kissed her again; and, lifting her in his arms, stepped stealthily with her toward the doorway.

No one barred their progress, and he succeeded in getting out of the cabin.

He had still ahead of him the most delicate and dangerous part of his work.

Putting her down and taking her by the hand, he walked with her alongside the cabin in the shadow, she clinging tightly to his fingers, with a nervous quivering.

He went on until the guard could be plainly seen. Then he crouched down; and, putting his arms about her, held her close against his breast and began a tedious waiting.

Occasionally he whispered to her, to keep her quiet and to reassure her.

Then suddenly out of the gloom, as if it had flamed there, appeared a shining face.

The guard retreated with a cry of fear, and ran back into the enclosure; and Mad Charley, taking advantage of this, slipped out into the darkness with little Irene.

The face had disappeared, but he had not gone a dozen yards when he almost ran into the arms of Snowflake Sam, who was there in the path awaiting him.

Snowflake Sam had the concealing handkerchief over his face.

"Here's a friend you know, little one," said Mad Charley, placing her in his arms. "This is Snowflake Sam, from Benson's ranch. Your friends are out there, and he'll take you to them."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MAD CHARLEY'S PERIL.

Snowflake Sam lifted Irene Benson in his arms and hurried quietly away with her, while Mad Charley turned back with the intention of re-entering the stronghold.

But he found that was to be a difficult matter, for another guard had taken position at the gate whom he could not pass without attracting attention.

While he hesitated, debating within himself whether to return to the outlaws or to go straight to the cowboys and instantly sever his connection with Tiger Dan's band, three or four men sallied out through the gateway for the purpose of making an investigation.

When they had passed, and he saw the guard talking to others, he stepped boldly up to the gate.

"That spirit business puzzles me like the mischief!" was the declaration with which he greeted them. "I saw that face, and ran out here, thinking if there was a body below it I could find it out; but I wasn't able to see anything! Nothing but these rocks and pines!"

The men seemed to accept his statement, though he saw one of them look at him queerly and questioningly.

Then, while they still talked, he entered the enclosure.

The searching party was as unsuccessful as those that had gone before it, and came back in a little while; but before it came back the absence of the girl was discovered by Wild Kate.

Her anger and suspicion flamed out instantly.

Less than ten minutes later Tiger Dan walked straight up to Mad Charley and laid a hand heavily on his shoulder.

"You don't go out of this place, nor you don't go anywhere, until you've explained some things!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Wild Kate says that you let Irene git away, or helped her to git away, and from what the guard says, I've an idee she's about right!"

Mad Charley sternly faced his accuser, and replied, with much warmth.

"You want to go slow, Tiger Dan, even if you are chief here! I demand the proof of the things you say!"

"And, by heaven, you shall have them! It's my belief that you're a double-dyed traitor! What was you doin' outside a little while ago?"

"I saw what the guard saw, and went out to investigate it!"

"And who give you leave?"

"There wasn't any time to get leave. I went on my own responsibility, knowing that the thing would be gone if I tried to hunt you up first!"

Tiger Dan knew that nothing was so weakening and demoralizing as a belief that there might be traitors in the very heart of the band. He knew, too, that something must be done to make them know he had not lost his tiger grip; for, strange as it may seem, his harshness and immeasurable cruelty were the things that most bound these fierce men to him.

He would not hesitate to sacrifice Mad Charley if he thought it would strengthen him in the eyes of his followers, or serve to drive out of their minds the belief in the "spirit," which was proving so demoralizing.

A crowd—an angry crowd—was collecting.

Tiger Dan looked about on the men who had collected, and, seeing their anger, he forced Mad Charley ahead of him into the cabin which he used as his home and headquarters tent.

He pointed to a stool, into which Mad Charley dropped, striving to assume a coolness and fearlessness he did not feel.

Wild Kate came in, more bitter and malevolent than any man there.

"It was him!" pointing a skinny, accusing finger at Mad Charley. "I heerd enough to know it was him! He's been playing ghost, and it was him took Moll away, and then the girl!"

She glared at the prisoner a moment; then leaped toward him with the fury of a wildcat.

"What have you done with Moll?"

"Nothing! I did not do the things you charge against me! Why should I want to take Moll away from here?"

"I want you to hear me, Tiger Dan, and the rest of you! He asks why he'd want to take Moll away? I'll tell you: I heard him beggin' her to run away with him, no longer ago than yisterday! He wanted her to desert the band and go with him!"

This was the truth, and she said it in a way to carry conviction to many of the men, and particularly to Tiger Dan, who now looked keenly at her, and from her to Mad Charley.

"That's a lie!" Mad Charley declared. "Maybe you think you heard that, Kate, but you didn't!"

She looked as if she wanted to spring at him and tear his cheeks with her nails, but desisted. However, she stuck to her declaration, and it was evident she carried many of the band with her.

There was another thing that told even more strongly against Mad Charley than these statements of Wild Kate.

One of the band testified to having seen him slip away from the stronghold two or three times recently, and go toward a point in the lava hills where there was apparently nothing to attract him, unless it was a meeting with some scout or spy from the cowboy band.

Mad Charley tried to tear this evidence to pieces.

"When did you say you first seen me do this?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Well, it's not likely, as you'll all bear witness, that the cowboys could have reached this neighborhood as soon as that!"

However, the man stuck to his story, as Wild Kate had done to hers, and the growls against Mad Charley grew harsher and more significant.

All through the trial, which was conducted *a la* Judge Lynch, the outlaws kept their guns in their hands and were evidently in momentary expectation of an attack.

But the attack did not come.

Finally Tiger Dan, his face growing as black as a thunder cloud, got up from his stool.

Mad Charley knew from that look he could hope for nothing, and glanced longingly toward the door, as if half tempted to make a break for it.

"We'll have a little hanging bee, boys! I don't think it's safe to have anybody in this here camp ag'inst whom sich things kin be said. We might wake up some mornin' and find all our throats cut!"

The judgment met the approval of the outlaws, though some of them looked at Mad Charley as if they still harbored doubts on the subject of his guilt. But, as Tiger Dan's will was law, they stood ready to execute his commands.

Mad Charley stood up, in obedience to Tiger Dan's order, and tried to steel his nerves to the fate that seemed inevitable; but his eyes wandered longingly toward the door, and out into the shadows that lay beyond.

He knew that friends were out there who would make a desperate effort to effect his rescue, if they but knew how he needed their aid. How could he tell them of his peril?

The outlaws crowded close about him, and conducted him out of the cabin and slowly along to where there was a projecting beam. It formed part of a cabin roof, and was as good a ready-made gallows as could be found.

Over this beam a rope was thrown.

CHAPTER XIX.

MAD CHARLEY'S ESCAPE.

The desperate courage that had gained for the condemned man the name of Mad Charley now stood him in good stead. Though the chances were even less than one in ten that he would live to see another sunrise, his nerve did not desert him, nor did he lose hope.

"Pards," he said, as he was placed beneath the beam and the dangling rope, "it's never a good idea to be in too big a hurry! I've fought with you and for you! I've slept with you and ate with you! I've been a pard to every man of you; and yet, because of a whisper against me, you rush to hang me!"

He was talking to gain time quite as much as to stir them to leniency. He wanted time to evolve a plan of escape; and time might bring him aid from the outside; for he knew there was at least one out there who would risk all for him—Moll Almack.

The words were greeted with a sneering howl from Wild Kate. This was followed by angry comment on the part of the outlaws.

The evidence against him had been of a character to arouse their deepest suspicions and most malignant hate. They were so bloody-minded, too, that the mere thought of such a sacrifice was pleasant to them, and gave them a fierce joy, like the odor of fresh meat to a cat.

A single torch illumined the scene and threw a bloody light into the passion-seamed faces of the men of the hanging party.

Mad Charley ran his eyes over these faces and then looked out beyond the clamorous circle.

The light of the torch made everything beyond its influence as black as Egypt.

As his eyes thus roamed about, searching for an avenue, his muscles stiffened and he nerved himself for a struggle.

Then, with a leap like that of a panther, he sprang straight at the outlaw

leader, struck him down with a blow, and sprang for the gateway.

The guard pitched forward his rifle, but dared not fire, lest his bullet should slay friends.

But the pointing rifle caused Mad Charley to swerve in his course; and, before he could gain the gate, other men had leaped to a point that kept him from making his escape by that way.

He knew if he ran on he would be shot dead in his tracks, and so he turned aside, and, interposing the logs of a cabin between himself and his foes, he fled like a deer toward the other corner of the enclosure.

There was at that point a lower place in the palisades, which he thought he might scale by superhuman exertions, if given a favoring opportunity and a little time.

There was an instant pursuit; and, when he appeared again from behind the sheltering logs, a revolver shot rang out.

Tiger Dan, who was on his feet, struck to the earth, with a bitter curse, the outlaw who used the revolver.

"None o' that! If that crowd out there gits to thinkin' we're rowin' among ourselves we'll have 'em chargin' the walls in less than no time!"

Tiger Dan ran on toward the corner, which the prisoner had gained.

"Take him alive, boys! No shootin', mind ye!"

Mad Charley, finding he could not climb over the palisades, turned at bay and held aloft a stick which he had picked from the ground.

"Back!" he cried. "Back! I'll smash the head of the first man that comes near me! You hounds! You—"

The sentence was cut short; Wild Kate, regardless of the club, dashed in.

The club descended, striking her on the arm and disabling it. The blow caused the club to slip from Mad Charley's fingers and pitched him forward half on his face; and before he could recover three or four outlaws were piled on top of him.

He struggled from beneath them and fought like a fiend, but it was utterly useless. He was forced to give in. His clothing was in tatters, his face and head bloody, and his throat showed the black marks of choking fingers.

He was more than half dead before he yielded, and when he stood on his feet he gasped for breath.

Wild Kate, who had used her nails on him, glared at him vindictively, evidently desiring to again rush at him and claw him like a wildcat.

His struggles were feeble, as he was led back to the beam, where the noose still hung.

So exciting had been the chase and capture that the outlaws momentarily forgot the cowboys. Even the guard now started forward a step or two from the gate, anxious to witness the hanging.

But before the prisoner could be placed under the noose, a queer shuffling of hoofbeats was heard, and the outlaws, facing toward the gateway, fell back in alarm.

A horseless rider had appeared. A shining form, that was even more terrifying than the shining face had been.

It was the form of a horseman, mounted and spurring toward them; but he apparently rode the wind; for no horse was visible beneath him, though those queer hoofbeats were audible, after a ghostly fashion.

The guard gave a howl of dismay, dropped his gun, and abandoned his post.

Even Tiger Dan fell back a pace, and the vindictive exclamations of Wild Kate were stilled.

Then the shining arms were seen to swing upward, a shining rifle was brought into view, and leveled at the frightened group beneath the cabin beam.

No report came from the gun, but a bullet must have left it, for one of the outlaws, standing well forward, leaped up with a screech, and then dropped down.

The fright became a panic; and, when

the gun was seen lifting again, they ran from the spot, dashing pell-mell behind the cabins for shelter.

It was an opportunity that Mad Charley was not slow to improve. Though but a moment before he had seemed half dead from exhaustion and loss of hope, he now straightened up and ran for the gateway with the speed of a deer.

He passed through it and beyond it and ran on, until he had passed the shining figure of the horseless horseman.

Then he seemed about to halt, when a whisper came to him, ordering him to go ahead.

This order he obeyed, and the horseman turned about, still seeming to be swung in midair on an invisible steed; and, shortly afterward, turning the corner of the lava slope, disappeared from the view of the scared outlaws.

Mad Charley would have been entirely safe if he had kept on toward the cowboy camp. But he changed his direction when he had gone a few yards, and, by a roundabout course, crept back toward the palisades.

He knew the extent of the panic, and was anxious to see its after effects.

That the shining horseman was none other than Snowflake Sam he was well aware, mounted on a black pony, whose hoofs were wrapped with cloth to deaden and muffle their sound. The dead black color of the pony, contrasted with the shining of the phosphoric preparation applied to the clothing, the face, and the gun, had made the pony invisible.

To his astonishment, he found that the outlaws were already regaining their heads.

Though the man shot had leaped up with a screech and fallen unconscious, he was found to be not seriously hurt. The ball had ploughed open the flesh, but it had not broken the bones of the head and forced its way into the brain.

The ball had come from an air rifle that had not sufficient propelling power to kill; a thing, however, that the outlaws did not know.

The sight of the wound and the blood somewhat corrected the "spirit" idea that was seething in their brains.

They were not so afraid of mortals as of spirits, and Tiger Dan, crowding down his nervousness, soon had a few men of courage about him, who were willing to look into the matter.

With these he slipped away and down the lava slope, at almost the same instant that Mad Charley reapproached the palisade.

They were fairly on him before he knew it, and he only escaped detection by dropping softly to the rocks, and lying there, with his face against the lava, as they stole by.

Tiger Dan's feet almost touched him, but Tiger Dan went on, all unaware of the fact, leaving Mad Charley shivering and bathed in a cold perspiration.

When they had passed, Mad Charley crept still nearer the stockade and looked into the camp through the gateway.

A guard was on duty there again, rifle in hand.

Something of the old recklessness, the quality that had made his companions call him "mad," came over him, and, picking up a pebble, he threw it rattling at the guard's feet, and then lay there, laughing till his sides shook to see the guard leap up and stare about in an evident panic.

"If I'd just whisper 'Boo!' he'd run like a scared deer!"

The sentry was staring in his direction with eyes that looked like goggles in the faint light.

Mad Charley might have ventured on other reckless proceedings, but that he fancied he heard the scouting party returning.

He had made some discoveries worth telling, he thought; and so, without waiting to learn more and run further risks, he left his position near the wall and slipped away over the lava slopes, writhing along in the darkness with the stealth and ease of a wolf.

CHAPTER XX.

A PLAN THAT FAILED.

The part played by Snowflake Sam in the rescue of Mad Charley had been simple enough.

Scouting near the stronghold, he had discovered Mad Charley's capture and peril, and the trial given Mad Charley had afforded him ample time for the perfecting of a plan of rescue.

Some of the cowboys, on learning the true state of affairs, had been anxious to charge the stronghold; but, as this would undoubtedly have brought about the death of Mad Charley, Snowflake Sam opposed it so earnestly that the idea was abandoned.

With his face, clothing, and the air rifle (which he had brought from Flagstaff for just such uses) covered with the glowing phosphoric preparation, Snowflake Sam had mounted the night-black pony, whose feet had been closely and carefully muffled, and had ridden softly to the vicinity of the gate, clothed outwardly from head to foot in a heavy, dark blanket.

This blanket he had whipped off at the proper moment, and had then pushed the black pony toward the gate, lifting the rifle and firing when he thought the time had come for this part of the act.

He was back in the presence of the cowboys now—the blanket again hiding the shine of the phosphorus—and was telling them what he had done, and of the breaking away of Mad Charley during the fright of the outlaws.

That Mad Charley did not come began to be a source of uneasiness to all, and to none more than to Moll Almack, who was commencing to lose faith in the plan she had at first approved.

Then, while they were most stirred by deep anxiety, a low voice hailed, and the next minute Mad Charley, out of breath from the race he had run, was in their midst.

In spite of the presence of those who might regard her actions with ridicule, Moll Almack came up to him, put her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"You know she is to be my wife soon, pards!" Mad Charley explained, putting an arm affectionately around her waist and turning to these new friends.

Mad Charley's appearance and the story of how frightened the outlaws had been by Snowflake Sam's "spirit" manifestations, determined the cowboys on an immediate move against the stronghold.

They had only postponed it because an earlier attack would have imperilled the lives, first, of Irene, and afterward of Mad Charley.

Now there was nothing to urge delay.

"Drop the thing, and leave them alone?" Moll Almack pleaded.

She could not forget that these outlaws were the only friends she had ever known, and that the man and woman she had always thought her father and mother would be in deadly peril.

That Tiger Dan and Mad Kate were not really related to her, but that Tiger Dan was the murderer of her own father, impressed her; yet, as a mere fancy, or dream; and she could not at times credit the story told by Mad Charley, even though many things had already been brought up by the cowboys to authenticate it.

But Moll Almack's pleading in behalf of the outlaws was without avail. The cowboys had risked too much, and had their enemies too nearly in their power to think of abandoning the fight now. They were hot for the combat.

The plans were simple enough.

A careful advance was to be made in force—the "spirit" face and form to be used by Snowflake Sam, if it was thought advisable.

When the conference had ended, the details arranged and the posts of honor—which were the posts of greatest peril—assigned, Moll Almack was nowhere to be found.

Only a few minutes before she had

been seen talking to and fondling Irene; now she was not to be discovered within the confines of the camp.

Mad Charley could give no idea of what had become of her, he said, though it was observable that his face paled when he knew of her disappearance.

The guard, who was a watchful fellow, had not seen her leave, though it was certain she had crept by him.

The advance toward the outlaw's camp was made, notwithstanding this disquieting circumstance; though the fear was general that she had conveyed to the outlaws information of what was to be done, and that, in consequence, a trap would be laid for them.

By slow degrees the camp was approached. Daylight gleamed redly in the east before it was gained.

An ominous silence prevailed.

Mad Charley and Snowflake Sam crept up to the gateway, to learn the meaning of the silence.

In the gateway sat Moll Almack.

She caught sight of Snowflake Sam, got on her feet, and walked toward him.

"You're too late! They've been gone for hours!"

"And you gave them warning, so that they could slip away?"

"I intended to do that—that was why I slipped out of the camp—but I didn't do it—for the very good reason that they were gone when I got here! They cut out of their own accord."

It was even so.

She faced Mad Charley, when he appeared, quite as coolly as she had faced Snowflake; and to him, and to all the cowboys, confessed her intentions in leaving the camp.

As soon as the light had sufficiently increased the best trailers in the party undertook to follow the trail left by the fleeing outlaws.

They traced it as far as the obsidian slopes, a mile from the stronghold, and there lost it altogether.

These obsidian slopes were of the character of rough black glass and left no marks of any sort on their surface.

For a half day the cowboys remained in the vicinity, trying to decipher the blind trail; and when they found the thing to be impossible they turned homeward.

All but Snowflake Sam and Mad Charley.

They had been closely talking together for some time, and they announced that they could not at once return to the ranch, as they had an important visit to make and an important mission to perform, whose nature and character they were not then at liberty to disclose.

As the cowboys turned their backs on the stronghold flames shot upward from a dozen points at once. The cabins had been given to the torch.

CHAPTER XXI.

"I LOVE YOU."

When Snowflake Sam and Mad Charley arrived at Benson's ranch—which they did not long after the cowboys—they found that a real Apache uprising was feared throughout the territory, and that the authorities had taken alarm and soldiers were massing at Flagstaff.

Snowflake Sam saw Arthur Benson only for a few moments and was not given opportunity to speak to him.

A serious quarrel would have been the result, with probable bloodshed. This Arthur seemed well to understand, and he judiciously kept himself in the background and out of sight as much as he could.

Believing there was really no Apache uprising threatened, and that the scare was a needless fright, Snowflake Sam mounted again and galloped away toward Flagstaff for the purpose of seeing the colonel who had been given command of the troopers.

Colonel Gaines received Snowflake Sam courteously and listened quietly to his story.

"I sincerely hope that what you re-

port is true. All the same, until I am absolutely sure of it—which I can't be till the scare has ended bloodlessly—I am bound to act on the instructions I have received, and to-morrow morning I leave here with all the troopers for the southern mountains!"

Still convinced that he was right in his opinions, Snowflake Sam sat down and communicated his beliefs to those still higher in authority.

The next morning he saw, with genuine regret, the troopers depart from the place.

Having done what he could to avert the trouble he thought he saw impending, he now felt free to return to the ranch, a thing he was wild to do, for he wanted to meet the false Arthur face to face and have it out with him, and we wanted to meet another, also, face to face—the woman he loved!

Great was his astonishment, therefore, as we went down the street, after having committed his letters to the post office, to encounter Huldah Benson.

She was dressed in black and her pale face evidenced much mental suffering.

He could not fail to note how charmingly this mourning costume became her, and his heart quickened in sympathy with her evident distress; but all these feelings fled, as the clouds flee before the sun, when she opened her lips to address him, and bestowed on him one of her rare and gracious smiles.

"I didn't expect to see you here!"

"Nor I you!" he faltered.

She exhibited genuine pleasure in the meeting, nevertheless, and made him happy by saying she intended to return to the ranch by the next stage.

"I just ran up here to do a little shopping. This isn't Frisco or New York, but one can buy some things even out here!"

She held up a bundle.

"You men would hardly believe, now, that there is a milliner shop here and regular stores carrying the latest things to be had for the daughters of Eve?"

"I'm willing to believe anything of this wonderful West! And you're going on the next stage? I'm going on the same stage! You'll not object?"

"I shall be delighted to have you for a fellow-traveler!"

It was thus settled, and the stage southward that afternoon bore them as passengers—and, to their great delight, it bore no others!

The driver perched high on the box, with his ears filled with the clatter of hoofs and the rattle of wheels, and his attention taken by the difficult task of driving four horses, was not likely to hear anything they might say.

And so, before they were a mile from the place, Snowflake Sam had broached the subject of the false Arthur Benson.

As if those bloody Apaches had not enough to answer for, he gets this band of outlaws to disguise as such and make a raid!

"And in that raid his own father—that is, the man he was calling his father—was killed!" she ejaculated, in a horrified voice.

Snowflake Sam did not reply directly.

"Did you never think it strange?" he asked, "that the body of your father was not found?"

"It was strange!"

Suddenly she clasped her hands and looked at him.

"Oh, it can't be that father is alive?"

"I didn't say so! But a life insurance company would never pay money out unless there was stronger proof of death than we have in this case!"

The suggestion was so hopeful that they discussed it at some length, going back and forth from it to the duplicity and villainy of Arthur Benson; and she soon found this suddenly aroused hope growing into a positive belief that her father yet lived.

That was a ride never to be forgotten by Snowflake Sam. He was with the woman he loved!

Finally the opportunity came for which he had been thirsting. The talk

of her father and the feeling that she was utterly alone and helpless against these foes, except for the favors of faithful friends, had brought tears to her eyes.

"I want to be more than a mere friend to you!" he whispered, bending down and looking into her face as if he would read her very soul. "I love you, Huldah!"

She shrunk from him at first, while a flush suffused her cheeks. But he could see she was not offended.

Thereupon his courage grew. He felt that this was an opportunity that might never return; that on the result of it hung his life's happiness, and the thought gave him a tender courage.

He repeated the words, "I love you!" and then, when she did not reply, he slipped an arm about her waist and urged his cause with a lovely eloquence that would brook no refusal.

"You love me in return?" he questioned.

Bending lower, he caught the reply: "From the moment of our first meeting you have had my heart!"

And the stage bounded on, the driver all unaware of the love scene that had taken place and the vows that were being plighted.

CHAPTER XXII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

When Snowflake Sam and Huldah Benson reached the ranch, they found that Arthur Benson had entered on a bold step.

He had taken possession of the ranch as the son and heir of the Ranch King; and, but a short while before, he had up before him some of the cowboys, giving them pointed instructions as to his ideas of how things were to be run.

It was clear that he meant to fight for what he declared to be his rights.

He was not put in a good humor by the appearance of Snowflake Sam, and did not hesitate to express his contempt of Snowflake and Snowflake's friends.

Snowflake Sam sought him out and asked for an interview. His heart was bitter with recollections of recent events.

"There's no use pretending we can be friends!" Arthur declared, when they were alone together. "You've said a good many things against me which I have heard."

"And which I have no notion of taking back!"

"As the son and heir—"

Snowflake Sam's anger flamed out.

"As the son and heir, I denounce you as an impostor and a grand scoundrel!"

Arthur Benson fell back with a look of dismay.

"Wha-at do you mean?" he stammered.

"I mean just this: I am Arthur Benson, the son of Benson, the Ranch King, and you are a vile impostor and a villain of the deepest dye!"

The man who has been called Arthur Benson gathered his energies, straightened himself, and laughed Snowflake Sam in the face.

"That's a fairy tale you'll find it hard to make people believe!"

The door of the room was open, and, looking beyond, into the corridor, he saw Orrin Jude and Mad Charley.

Mad Charley had just returned to the ranch, having been absent on a mysterious mission, whose nature he would impart to no one.

The voices of Snowflake Sam and Arthur Benson had been pitched higher than they had realized; and it was this fact that had drawn Orrin Jude and Mad Charley into the corridor.

"Not so hard as you might think, Mr. Whatever-your-right-name-is!" Orrin Jude exclaimed, pressing forward as if to back Snowflake Sam in any assertion he might make.

Since the time of their fight there had been bad blood between Orrin Jude and Arthur Benson, and Orrin was really itching for an opportunity to get even

with the man he had learned to hate, despise and distrust.

Arthur Benson greeted his assertion with an open sneer.

"You may know something about cattle, my fine fellow, but about this matter you don't know anything. As for these preposterous assertions of the man who calls himself Snowflake Sam, no one but a brainless idiot or a crazy man would credit them for a moment!"

He turned to Snowflake Sam, the sneer deepening.

"You say you are the real son? How can you show it? Mr. Benson accepted me, as is known by everybody. You came here and he did not recognize you! Now, that he is dead, you set up this flighty claim. It hasn't a leg to stand on, and you know it. Bah!"

Snowflake Sam looked at him in admiration. He knew he had dealt Arthur Benson a knock-down blow. Arthur had fairly reeled on receiving it. But now Arthur was erect and defiant.

"My dear fellow, you ought to go on the stage. You're really wasting your talents out here in this desert! Take my advice and become a theatrical star!"

Arthur colored with increasing indignation.

"This is my house, sir! I warn you to leave it!"

He motioned toward the door.

Snowflake Sam remained rooted in his tracks, and only laughed.

Arthur took a step toward him.

"Leave this room. I am master here. As the son of Bill Benson, and the owner of this place, I order you to leave it! If you don't—"

"You'll do what?"

"That!"

A smart blow resounded. Arthur had taken a quick step forward and planted a slap on Snowflake's cheek.

Instantly Snowflake Sam's fist shot out, but Arthur Benson leaped aside and avoided the blow—and then there was a blinding flash and a report.

Snowflake Sam staggered against the wall, and Orrin Jude flew to his assistance.

Snowflake straightened up. He had not been hit by the bullet, but its wind had brushed his cheek and the powder had scorched his flesh. As for the ball, it was buried in the door jamb.

Snowflake's hand went toward his revolver, but Orrin Jude sprang on him and knocked it down.

Then Orrin sprang for the throat of Arthur, who still held the pistol and was in the mind to use it.

"Stand back!" Arthur cried. "Stand back, or you'll get the next bullet!"

Mad Charley seized Snowflake Sam, fearing he meant to rush on Arthur's weapon.

The shot and the noise of the quarrel had penetrated to other parts of the house, and Huldah and Moxie, together with little Irene, now appeared.

Snowflake Sam controlled himself with an effort and freed himself from the grasp of Mad Charley.

"It was he who fired, you will witness! I don't wish to hurt him, or to have any further quarrel with him. He is beneath contempt. I warn him, though, that I shall be on guard against treachery!"

He turned to leave the room.

"And I say to you what I said awhile ago, that your room here is a good deal better than your company; and, if you're any gentleman, you'll leave the ranch at once!"

Snowflake Sam flashed back on him from the doorway:

"This ranch is my home! William Benson was my father! I have proofs of my claim, and we'll let the courts settle the question of who is the rightful heir!"

Though he said it boldly, it was really with a sinking heart.

Snowflake Sam began to see that he had jeopardized his cause by delay. He should have put forth his claim on his arrival.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RANCH KING'S RESURRECTION.

This quarrel created a sensation. The fact that Snowflake Sam claimed to be the son of the Ranch King soon spread among the cowboys, where he had many friends, and caused them to array themselves into two hostile camps. Naturally, Orrin Jude was the head of one of these camps.

Snowflake Sam's announcement that he was the rightful heir, while it quickened the heartbeats of Huldah Benson, was not a surprise to her. He had told her this during that stage ride.

That night, after the quarrel, Snowflake Sam, Mad Charley and Orrin Jude had a long conference concerning the present state of affairs; and, as a result of this conference, Mad Charley left the ranch just as day was beginning to break.

He slipped quietly away, taking good care, as he thought, to keep his movements from being seen; but not sufficient care, as he afterward discovered.

When he was out of sight of the ranch buildings he turned into a hollow, where he had two horses picketed and saddled.

One of these horses he mounted, and, leading the other by a halter, galloped away toward the southwest.

When he had ridden an hour or more he approached a range of rocky and wooded hills.

Into these hills he pressed, and, entering a gorge, found himself soon before the mouth of a cave.

As he approached it, some one leaped up with a cry and came toward him.

It was Benson, the Ranch King!

Benson's hair was disheveled, his clothing disarranged, and his general appearance tattered and unwholesome. There was also in his face the look of a man who is not in full possession of his mental faculties.

There had been a bandage on his head, covering a wound. A strip of the bandage still remained, but it had been pushed aside. However, the wound was well concealed by his heavy hair.

Mad Charley swung himself out of the saddle and took the Ranch King's extended hand.

"So you're all right, eh? How's that place on your head gettin'? And that food I left you?—I reckon you've got plenty of it still?"

"They haven't been smart enough yet to find me!"

Benson straightened up and looked cunningly around and down the gorge towards the open country.

"Them Apaches are sly dogs, but they're not sly enough for Bill Benson! I crawled up to the top of that rock yesterday and saw one of them out in the sage brush. He was pokin' around as if huntin' for a trail. If he'd 'a' come this way I'd have got a club and smashed his head when he crep' round that rock!"

"You're sure it wasn't a cowboy?"

Mad Charley was picketing his ponies, driving an iron picket pin into the earth with a stamp of his heel.

He took Benson by the arm and walked back with him into the recesses of the cave.

There was a candle on the ledge, and Mad Charley showed that he knew of its presence there and of what the cave contained; for, without asking any questions, he struck a match and held it up to light the candle.

The knowledge of this cave and of Benson's occupation of it had been Mad Charley's secret. He had slipped away to it from the outlaw camp, drawing suspicion against himself, and had visited it at every opportunity.

The reason of Mad Charley's presence with the band of Tiger Dan has been explained.

As a member of that band he had become aware of the attack planned by the outlaws against the ranch, though he had not found it possible, because of the limited time at his disposal, to slip away from the band and give the ranchman warning.

In the same way he had learned of the conference between Tiger Dan and Arthur, as well as many other things that promised to tell against the false heir in the fight that was now on.

Though unable to give the ranchman warning, when the latter was shot down in his own doorway, but not killed, it had been Mad Charley who had borne him away unobserved during the hurly-burly of the attack.

He had brought him to this cave; had nursed him back to life and strength; only to find that Benson's mind seemed almost gone.

In the cave the Ranch King had been visited by Snowflake Sam, in company with Mad Charley, but Benson had turned coldly from Snowflake and had persistently refused to see in him the son who had so long before left the old ranch in wrath.

"It was a very funny Apache!" Benson chirped, as the flame of the candle illumined the gloomy place. "Did you ever see an Indian that turned to two Indians when you looked at him right hard? Well, this one did!"

By making him fear discovery by the Apaches, Mad Charley had been able to induce Benson to remain in the gorge. Now he saw that this fear was becoming too dominant in Benson's mind.

"I'm going to take you where they can't ever find you! How would you like to get on that horse out there and ride with me to Flagstaff?"

Benson's eyes sparkled with delight.

"And if they should come we'd give 'em a race, eh? That's the ticket! What horse have you got for me? Don?"

"Yes, your favorite! You could run away from anything in the territory on him. And these Apaches are mostly on foot, or mounted on stolen ponies, which they ruin for fast running in a little while. You'll go with me right away?"

Benson's impatience to be gone became a fever. He ran nervously in and out of the cave, talked to the horses and to the rocks, and constantly implored Mad Charley to hurry.

There was not much to be put in readiness; a few things which Mad Charley had brought to the cave for the old man's comfort—these were all.

Then suddenly the attitude of the Ranch King changed. He became suspicious.

"You was with that Apache band, you told me! You want to give me up to them! I can see treachery in your eyes!"

Mad Charley put down the bundle, coolly sat down on the rock, and by dint of much talking on other subjects sought to change the trend of Benson's thought. He was resolved to take Benson with him, even though he should be forced to bind him to do it.

In the conference had between Snowflake Sam, Mad Charley and Orrin Jude, the conclusion had been reached to take the Ranch King from his cave retreat to San Francisco for treatment that should restore to him his mental faculties, whose impairment had been much increased by the shot from the outlaw's rifle.

If he could once be brought back to the full possession of his senses, Snowflake Sam believed it would be possible to show him who was the real son and who the pretender.

The story of Snowflake's leaving the ranch so many years before has not been fully told. A few words will tell it:

After a violent quarrel with his father, the real Arthur Benson (Snowflake Sam) had left the ranch in anger, vowing he would never return to it.

He went direct to San Francisco and sailed thence to Australia.

Five years he spent in the gold fields and two years in the Australian bush. Then he went to Alaska, on hearing the news of great gold discoveries there.

In Alaska his comparative nearness

to the old home brought about his final return to it, he resolving to throw himself on his father's mercy and crave pardon.

But, on reaching Flagstaff, he had learned of the return of Arthur (the false Arthur) and the latter's acceptance by his father, and had then resolved to visit the place as Snowflake Sam, chance afterward making it possible for him to save his father and those in the stage from the dynamiters in Glass Mountain Gorge.

Sitting now on the rock, Mad Charley talked "a streak" in his effort to change the course of Benson's fancies, and at last had the satisfaction of knowing he had succeeded.

Benson again expressed a willingness to ride to the railway at Flagstaff and there take the cars to Frisco.

"The Apaches can't never get me there!" he chirped, with strange pathos.

"And you must always remember that I'm your friend, and wouldn't have you do anything that I didn't think for your good!"

"Yes, I'll remember it! And I need friends now!"

The wound was dressed and again bandaged, and the Ranch King was induced to put on some clothing Mad Charley had brought from the ranch for the purpose, which he had previously refused to don.

Then they mounted the ponies and together rode out of the gorge and set out for the distant railway, riding almost due north, in a line that would take them to the westward of the ranch.

Hardly were they clear of the flanks of the hills and out where they could overlook the country when Mad Charley was made anxious by the appearance of a cloud of dust, which soon resolved itself into galloping horsemen.

In a little while he saw that these horsemen were following his trail to the gorge.

A look of fear came to the Ranch King's face.

"They're not Apaches!" Mad Charley assured.

He wondered if they were friends or foes, and saw he would soon know, for he and the ranchmen had been sighted and the horsemen were turning in that direction.

Mad Charley spurred on to meet them, thinking a bold course better than a cowardly one.

He was much disturbed when the horsemen drew near and he saw they were cowboys from the ranch under charge of Arthur Benson.

Arthur reined in with a smile, and extended a hand to the Ranch King.

"Don't you know me, father? I'm your son, Arthur!"

The Ranch King opened his eyes wide with pleasure. He had not recognized in this dust-covered individual the "son" he had last seen at the ranch.

Before Mad Charley could interfere, Benson was out of the saddle and climbing like a child up the stirrup leathers to reach Arthur, who bent over and encouragingly lifted him.

The cowboys sat in their saddles, smiling widely.

Among them all there was not a man whom Mad Charley could call friend, and he saw that three of them were recently members of Tiger Dan's band of road agents.

The outlook was not pleasant.

"We thought you dead—thought the Apaches had killed you! And here you are, alive and well! You don't know how much it pleases me, your son! Where have you been? Where has that man been keeping you?"

"He put me in the cave in the gorge to keep me away from the Apaches! I seen one of the red devils out there yesterday, but he didn't see me!"

"He put you in the gorge and held you a prisoner?"

"Nothing of the kind, sir!" Mad Charley asserted.

He saw that trouble was bound to

come between him and these men, and that it might as well come at once as later. They had followed his trail from the ranch, and their looks now showed they were intent on doing him injury.

"What do you say about it, father? Did he hold you there a prisoner?"

"Oh, no! He is my friend! He saved me from the Apaches!"

Arthur motioned quietly to two of his men, who pushed their horses closer to Mad Charley. Mad Charley did not fail to note the action.

"I want you to understand that what he says is so—that I was his friend when he needed a friend, and that I have been kind to him and nursed him well. He was shot in the head by some scoundrels, and it may be you could guess their names!"

One of the men who had pushed his horse nearer at this moment drew a revolver and spurred his animal violently against the one ridden by Mad Charley.

Before Mad Charley could wheel about to meet this charge, the revolver exploded and his horse sunk down with a bullet in its brain.

Loud cries and exclamations followed, with commands from Arthur Benson.

Mad Charley tried to extricate himself, but his feet had become tangled in the stirrup leathers, and the struggling and kicking of the horse kept him from freeing himself.

He saw the revolver of the man who had fired pointed straight at him, and expected death.

But the revolver muzzle was lowered; and then he felt himself gripped from behind by the strong hands of men who had dismounted for the purpose of overpowering him.

He writhed and twisted, but resistance was useless. He was seized by the arms and legs and dragged away from the horse, and then other men hurried up and he was bound with ropes and lifted to the back of one of the ponies.

It was the largest pony there, and he found that he was to ride in front of one of the outlaws, the saddle being removed for the purpose.

As for Benson, the Ranch King, he had viewed the entire affair with stupid and helpless amazement.

This binding of the man he had thought his benefactor was not pleasing to him.

Seeing this, Arthur Benson began to cry out against Mad Charley in loud abuse:

"You scoundrelly hypocrite, to try to deceive my poor old father in that way! Why, father, don't you know that this man is a member of the band of Tiger Dan?"

The Ranch King turned on the prisoner a doubting and questioning look.

"It's a lie!" Charley cried, with vehemence.

"Wasn't you one of the men who were painted up as 'Paches and who shot father? Deny that, if you can!"

Mad Charley saw that such an admission would damn him forever in the eyes of the half-imbecile ranchman, and that no evidence or explanation could be given that would bring Benson to an understanding of the true situation.

"Is it so?" Benson broke in, his voice quivering with suspicion. "Have you been fooling me?"

"I have not been fooling you! That man wants you to think me a villain. I am not. I am your friend. Yes, and I'm the friend of your son! That man is not your son."

The bewildered look on the face of the Ranch King deepened. These charges and counter charges were too much for him.

Arthur Benson saw that further words were a waste of breath at that moment.

"Men, you know your duty! We'll take this traitor and outlaw to the ranch, where we'll try him by Judge Lynch, and where we'll hang him in the presence of all the cowboys! We'll give him a show, and convict him on evidence he can't get away from!"

The thing had been deliberately planned, there could be no doubt, for there was a great deal of evidence against Mad Charley that might be twisted in a very damaging way, and he would not be given opportunity to get witnesses and documents to substantiate his claims of innocence.

He recognized the danger, but only smiled.

"Heave ahead! It's your inning now! Maybe mine'll come after awhile! Every dog has his day!"

Then the cowboys put spurs to their ponies, and the return to the ranch was commenced, the Ranch King riding by the side of the man who claimed to be his son, and Mad Charley bound as a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DIVISIONS AND DANGERS.

The arrival of this party at the ranch created a flurry of excitement.

To many it was the first knowledge they had that the old Ranch King was alive.

Huldah rejoiced to see her father again, though much depressed and distressed at his mental state, and wrought to feverish uneasiness by Arthur's actions.

As the Ranch King's adopted daughter, she claimed the right to take charge of Benson, and, when their rather hysterical greetings were ended and he had shaken hands all around, she carried him off to the room he had formerly occupied, where she hoped to nurse him back to his old-time vigor of mind and body.

Since Arthur had asserted his control there had been such a thorough weeding out of the old employes that not many of them now remained. Mad Charley had observed some of Tiger Dan's men with the force that arrested him, and he now saw, to his dismay, that nearly every cowboy on the ranch was in reality a member of Tiger Dan's band. It was a fact that boded ill to him.

Mad Charley, in spite of the objections raised by Snowflake Sam, was put under guard in one of the bunk rooms, before whose door a cowboy now walked back and forth, armed to the teeth.

Arthur Benson had reiterated his charges against Mad Charley, and now he got his followers together to determine on the course best to pursue.

Orrin Jude and those who clung to him drew aside with Snowflake Sam to await the result of this conference.

Orrin and Snowflake were determined that, before they would let Mad Charley be killed in the manner Arthur Benson proposed, they would cover the ranch grounds with dead outlaws and cowboys, even though their own lives had to pay for it.

This knowledge deterred Arthur Benson from proceeding too rapidly, and finally forced a change in his plans.

"Look at the hydrophobia cats herdin' off there by themselves, so pizen mean that they make the very air sick when they breathe it! Rattlesnakes is like turtle doves alongside of 'em!"

Orrin Jude glared at the men gathered around Arthur Benson, in a way to show that he half hoped a fight would yet come of it.

After an ocean of talk, Arthur Benson separated himself from his men, and came toward the little group clustered about Snowflake and Orrin.

"We've come to a decision," he announced, stopping while yet a few yards separated them. "In deference to your wishes and not because we don't believe the man guilty, we have decided to send Mad Charley to Flagstaff, and have him jailed there, and prosecuted for abduction and outlawry!"

"Nothing of the kind shall be done! We know your little scheme! You've got a lot of men with you there, who would swear his life away, and be glad of the chance. When he leaves this ranch, it's as a free man!"

The men about Snowflake Sam straightened up sternly, and looked hard at the man whom they believed to be an infamous impostor.

Arthur Benson flushed with anger. He had not counted on this opposition, but had supposed that his offer to send Mad Charley to Flagstaff would be hailed with pleasure.

Miss Huldah, who had disappeared again, and been closeted with the Ranch King, appeared opportunely at this juncture, leading Benson by the hand.

There was a look in her eyes that made Arthur curse her inwardly, though he only smiled and showed his white teeth.

"What is this I hear?" Benson demanded, looking straight at the man he had accepted as his son. "Huldah tells me that Mad Charley saved the life of little Irene, and Irene says the same thing. So I say, let him go!"

"But—"

"Do you hear me?" stamping on the ground in wild impatience. "Let the man go! If he needs punishing, I'll see that he gets it. Who put you at the head of the ranch here, anyway?"

"I am your son!"

"My son, yes; but not yet the master of the Benson ranch! Where's Orrin Jude?"

"I've discharged him."

Benson became furious.

"Send him here at once!"

"But—"

"Send him here at once! If you don't, you're no son of mine!"

The threat terrified Arthur, and he called to Orrin Jude to come forward; which the latter did, with some show of reluctance.

"You're the foreman of this ranch, Orrin Jude! Is that man, Mad Charley, kept a prisoner at your orders?"

"Not a bit of it. It's at his orders!"

"Release him, then!"

"Father," Arthur interposed, unable to endure this, "you're making a big mistake! Who's been putting silly ideas into your head?"

"Silly ideas? Silly ideas? This girl here, God bless her, the true daughter of an honorable ranchman! She says I mustn't let wrong be done, and, by heaven! I'm not going to."

Arthur was in despair.

Seeing that Orrin seemed to hesitate and that Arthur was indignant and in a half defiant mood, Benson rushed off toward the bunk house; which he entered, in spite of the protest of the guard, and, with his own hands, released Mad Charley.

"You saved my little daughter, Irene. You've my thanks for that. Old Benson never forgets one who helps him and his family!"

Orrin Jude, who had hastily followed him, heard it, and the tears came into the honest fellow's eyes.

Arthur saw that it was useless to kick against the pricks. Opposition to his father at that time would have lost him nearly everything he had gained. He saw it; and, though grinding his teeth in rage, he submitted as mildly as he could.

"It's not my intention to wrong any one, father. You ought to know that. My only desire is to punish those who are guilty."

Nevertheless, as he saw Mad Charley leave the bunk house with a triumphant air, the desire was in his heart to strike him dead.

The Ranch King retired soon afterward, followed by Huldah. She was resolved not to let Arthur come near him till this danger had blown over, fearing Arthur's influence over him.

Snowflake Sam and Arthur met near the corral, out beyond the bunk houses.

The meeting was accidental, and each dropped a hand to his coat pocket.

"No need to shoot!" Arthur observed, with a hoarse laugh. "You've downed me this time; but it's a victory that won't last. You say that I'm an outlaw, and not what I claim. You will

have to prove it, which is a thing you can't do. I've got the inside track, and I mean to hold it.

"Now, I will say to you, and you can do as you please, that you'd better leave the ranch. Your safety lies in that direction."

"Do you mean to threaten me?"

"Not at all. I'm not such a fool. These new cowboys, though, are a rough lot. They might quarrel among themselves some night, and accidentally shoot you; or they might stab you to get hold of your purse. If you want to stay, though, stay. You'll find that the son of Benson, the Ranch King, is hospitable."

Snowflake Sam was not in the mood for quarreling; so he passed on, revolving the words. He realized how great was his danger.

"I will see Huldah about it."

He did so; and found that Huldah was nervous over the occurrences of the forenoon, and that, though she much desired his presence and company, she was anxious to have him leave the place for a while.

"I should go with you, only that father needs a protector. Moxie is to stay with me."

But the arrangement did not satisfy Snowflake Sam.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN PERIL DIRE.

Snowflake Sam pondered the matter throughout the night, and had a long talk with Orrin Jude and Mad Charley on the subject.

The next morning Huldah sent for him, and informed him she had determined to ride to Satterlee's ranch, a number of miles away, where she had a young lady friend, who would be only too glad to aid her in this hour of her need.

She and Miss Satterlee had been schoolgirls together in Frisco, and Miss Satterlee had spent a portion of the previous summer on the Benson ranch.

Miss Satterlee was a young lady of courageous mold, an excellent horsewoman, a splendid shot with rifle and revolver, and as cool and nerved in times of danger as any man. No one could be better adapted for a companion in such a time.

Finally, when she had made all this clear, Miss Huldah requested that Snowflake Sam and Mad Charley should act as her escort on this trip, a request that brought a flutter of pleasure to Snowflake's heart.

It was thought advisable by Huldah that Orrin Jude should remain on the ranch with her father and Moxie; and for herself, she declared she would feel as safe, guarded by Mad Charley and Snowflake Sam, as if surrounded by a company of troopers.

The arrangements were quickly made, and the three rode away for Satterlee's ranch, Miss Huldah mounted on Don, the riding animal that the Ranch King so highly prized.

Thirty miles or more due westward lay Satterlee's ranch, with the intervening country chiefly desert and lava; but the trail, though not much used, was good, and the fresh horses went over the ground at a rattling pace.

More than half the distance was passed over, the stage trail to Flagstaff was crossed and left behind, when Mad Charley reined in abruptly, and said:

"Will you take a squint out between them rocks? Quick, before it's gone!"

Snowflake Sam and Huldah glanced in the direction indicated, and saw something white bob out of sight.

"That was the breech-cloth of an Apache! He dropped down behind that lava spur. There's more of them about!"

Huldah Benson turned pale, and Snowflake Sam uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

"I can see you're afraid of trouble. Do you think there's any truth in that story about the Apaches going on the war path?" Snowflake asked.

"Apaches have no business out here. This is not their reservation. And the way that fellow slipped out of sight tells its own story. There's an ambush among those lava boulders. Well, we'll fool them. We'll not ride into it!"

Mad Charley knew that the keen eyes of the Apaches had noted, and that they understood the reason of this sudden halt, and that it was useless to try to deceive them. Therefore, he boldly turned his horse toward the right, for the purpose of avoiding the lava slope.

Snowflake Sam and Huldah followed his example.

But they quickly saw they were not to escape so easily. A half-dozen rifle bullets came screaming out from among the boulders, while two flew down from the rocks toward which they had headed.

The rifles were truly aimed and the result disastrous. Snowflake's pony fell, mortally hurt, and the big horse ridden by Huldah got a slight gash in its shoulder.

"We're in for it!" said Mad Charley, with grim earnestness. "There's no use to try to run now!"

Before he could say more, another volley screamed past them.

The Apaches were armed with the latest patterns of repeating rifles, which they had bought or stolen; and, for Apaches, their shooting was not bad.

Snowflake leaped to the ground, and reached a hand toward Miss Huldah.

"Mount this pony, and ride as hard as you can straight back to the ranch! Charley and I will cover your retreat!"

She took his extended hand, and leaped from the saddle, but not for the purpose of mounting the pony.

"And leave both of you here to be killed? Not a bit of it!"

Mad Charley's rifle crashed at that moment; and an Apache, who had exposed himself in trying to get a good aim, fell back with a bullet in his shoulder.

"That pile of rocks over there!" Mad Charley exclaimed, as he dropped the gun from his cheek. "We can stand the beggars off, if we can make it! No use trying that pony now!"

Another shot had come from the lava, and Snowflake's pony stumbled, showing it was hard hit.

The rocks were not a dozen steps, and Mad Charley led the way toward them at a jump. The others followed him; and, as they did so, another shower of bullets whistled by.

Snowflake Sam felt a stinging sensation in his wrist, and, looking down, observed that a ball had grazed it, without other damage, however, than leaving a red welt.

The rocks were speedily gained, and were found to offer better shelter than even Mad Charley had thought.

They were in a pit now, ringed about by boulders, forming an ideal place, in many respects, for resistance to an attack of this character.

There was one great disadvantage: The place would furnish neither food nor water!

On one side, however, a rock arose, which would afford some shelter from the sun, whose rays were already growing hot.

As they gained this place, and dropped down out of sight, other bullets screamed by, in close proximity to their heads. But they were safe, so long as they kept themselves out of sight.

Mad Charley thrust the muzzle of his rifle up between two boulders, and looked out over the expanse. Not a thing was in sight to show that deadly foes were near.

Don, the big horse, alarmed and not seriously hurt, was trotting away from the dangerous vicinity, with head high in air and bridle rein flying free; but the ponies were both down, and one of them dead.

"They'll get Don in a little while, and will ride him—likely send one of their number on him for help!"

Mad Charley drew a bead on the noble animal, for he did not desire that Don should live to aid these enemies; then lowered the gun.

"We're in a muss, but it's not your fault, old boy! You don't know any better than to run off that way, and you can't be blamed, anyhow. No, I'll not shoot you, even to keep you from falling into the hands of them red devils!"

He was peering over the sand, when a rifle cracked, and a ball splintered a rock near his head.

He saw the spot from whence the smoke rose, and sent a bullet to it so promptly that a savage leaped high in the air, with a spasmodic jerk, and fell back, with a frightful yell.

"It'll learn 'em some sense! They'll not try to crowd us in a hurry after that!"

He was right. For nearly an hour afterward not a sign or sound indicated the vicinity of their enemies.

Huldah began to believe they had left the place, and was almost ready to urge Charley or Snowflake to go out after Don, for the purpose of making an attempt to depart.

Then a shot sounded so near that they fairly jumped.

Snowflake Sam fell back, with a little cry of astonishment. The bullet had gone through his hat.

Before he could say anything, the rifle of Mad Charley spoke, and an Apache, who had gained the top of the rock that overshadowed their hiding place fell sliding to the ground.

"We'll have to be more careful than ever. That rascal thought he had you when he pulled trigger."

Huldah screened herself under the shelter of the rock, and Snowflake Sam now shifted his position, so that no other Apache gaining that position could make a target of him.

One on each side of the boulder-hedged circle, Snowflake Sam and Mad Charley, screened by the big rocks, watched the movements of the Apaches out in front.

They shot at anything and everything they saw moving, though they tried to be careful in aiming, and to husband as much as possible their ammunition.

"If we can only stand them off till dark!" observed Mad Charley.

"Then what?" Huldah asked.

"I'll try to get out of here and ride for help. Don's down there in that hollow. I know he ain't much hurt, or he'd be limping! If I can make a dash out on Don, I can bring help!"

Don kept working nearer and nearer, and it began to seem soon that he understood the needs of the situation, and was trying to come back to the aid of his friends; but Snowflake discovered that a grassy hollow ran close along the rear of the place where they had taken refuge, and that Don was leisurely following up this hollow for the sweet grass.

Mad Charley studied the situation. "There'll never be a better time! It's a big risk, but no bigger than staying here. Them fellers will get us, sooner or later, if we stay here!"

He buckled his belt tighter, saw that his gun and cartridges were ready, threw out a number of the cartridges for the use of Snowflake, then sprang to his feet.

He was out of the hole and half way to the horse before the Apaches saw him and understood the nature of his undertaking. Then their rifles began to crack, and two of them leaped up in much excitement, exposing their persons to the aim of Snowflake Sam.

One of them tumbled down, badly hurt by a bullet from Snowflake's gun, and the rest dropped out of sight, though they continued to yell and to shoot at Mad Charley.

The latter seemed to bear a charmed life. Though the balls whistled all about him, he ran on untouched.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLAYING THE APACHES A TRICK.

Don threw up his head and snorted, as Mad Charley leaped at a bound into the saddle. He then took up the reins, and threw his repeating rifle across the pommel.

A touch of his spurred heels sent Don down the slope.

The Apaches were yelling louder than ever now, and were shooting, for the purpose of disabling the horse; but the excitement of the moment kept them from aiming with any accuracy, and Don flew on, unharmed.

"Howl, you red devils!" setting his teeth hard, and twisting about to fling back the taunt. "I'll have a lot of cowboys after you in a little while, and then you'll change your tune!"

He saw that some of the Apaches were running out toward the open country, and others climbing toward the tops of lava spurs—all shooting at him and yelling fit to split their lungs; and once in a while he heard the sharp, keen bark of the rifle of Snowflake Sam.

Don got down to the work in good shape, and quickly put a mile behind him; then he stumbled.

An anxious look came into Mad Charley's face; for, as he looked back, he saw that five or six of the Apaches had left the cover of the lava crests, and were trotting along after him, in their dogged and persistent way. They would never leave his trail, he knew.

He pushed Don on as fast as he could for another mile; but the horse limped more and more, and grew slower and slower; and Mad Charley saw, before this second mile was ended, that, if he got out of that country and brought help to Snowflake Sam and Huldah, he would have to engage in a foot race with those long-winded Apaches—and success in such a race was problematical.

When a half mile more was passed Mad Charley got out of the saddle; and, removing the saddle and bridle from Don, he pitched them into a gulch, and ran on afoot.

When he looked back he saw that the Apache runners were less than a mile behind him, and coming straight on.

"If worst comes to worst, I'll crawl into a hole, and I calculate that I can kill more than half of those fellows before they kin git me!"

Then he turned about again, settled into a steady trot, and endeavored to get over the ground as fast as he could, and at the same time save his strength for the final spurt that he knew must come.

As for Snowflake Sam and Huldah, while this dash of Mad Charley gave them temporary respite, it did not relieve them of the attention of their enemies.

To test their watchfulness, Snowflake Sam carefully lifted his hat on a stick. The quickness with which a hole was put through it proved to him that the Apaches were as eagle-eyed and murderous as ever.

He believed there were fifteen or twenty of the red devils, but could not tell. "Look! Look!"

The words were hardly out of the mouth of Huldah when a rifle sounded and a bullet cut through Snowflake's shoulder, and opened the skin. Only a fraction of the shoulder had been exposed.

Snowflake saw that the shot had come from a lava cone, higher up the slope, to which an Apache sharpshooter had crawled.

He set his teeth with grim determination, and waved back Huldah, who, filled with anxiety for his safety, was coming toward him, and would soon have exposed herself fatally.

Snowflake Sam lay quietly behind his boulder, watching for the man on the cone; and soon the opportunity he sought came.

A brown arm and shoulder came into view, followed by a portion of the neck and head of the Apache.

The rascal was seeking another shot. He got it, but not in the way he desired! Snowflake's rifle was in place, his finger touched the trigger, and a bullet from his gun caught the Apache high in the shoulder, and dropped him from the top of the cone as if he were a squirrel.

He was not killed, however, and rolled out of sight behind the cone as soon as he struck the ground.

Then the firing stopped for awhile.

Snowflake knew the Indians were seeking to dislodge him, and that if there was opportunity they would find it. He most dreaded fire, but could not see how they could use it.

An hour dragged by. The sun grew awfully hot. Their thirst became tormenting. The strain of the suspense was telling on Huldah, and also, though less, on Snowflake Sam himself.

Then a stone crashed down from the rock overhead, followed by another, and another.

The Apaches were hoping, by rolling down these rocks, to kill or injure the defiant whites. But it was time and labor lost, for the stones struck beyond the ring of boulders and bounded harmlessly away.

The day passed, and the night approached; then their anxiety grew, for the sun set, and Mad Charley did not reappear with aid.

Darkness gathered, and still Mad Charley had not come, forcing on them the conviction that some mishap had befallen him. The watchful Sam was alert for the enemy, whom he fancied he could see creeping toward him through the darkness, and every shadowy outline of rock or shrub was turned by his imagination into a foe.

Then a brilliant thought struck him, lifting his depressed spirits. He felt in one of his pockets, with an exclamation of delight, and drew out a package.

When he opened it Huldah saw it contained a shining substance—the phosphorus he had used in fighting the outlaws!

"If we stay here quietly we'll be killed before morning! These Apaches will crawl up like cats, and we'll never know they're near till they're ready to strike! Better act now, before they've had much chance to do anything!"

He revealed his plan, in which she acquiesced, for she was in a tremor of fear.

Carefully he sprinkled over her a quantity of the phosphoric preparation, then rubbed it on her face and hands until she shone like a glowing statue.

Thus shining, she rose calmly to her feet, and with arms extended, walked out into the open space beyond the lava ring, while Snowflake Sam, with his rifle ready cocked, slipped along at her heels, screened from view by the all-enveloping darkness.

Rising thus out of the ground, as it seemed, Huldah Benson looked like a figure not of earth.

Snowflake Sam was not wrong in thinking the Apaches would have their superstitious fears tremendously aroused by this exhibition.

Not a shot came—not a sound!—and Huldah, trembling in every limb, but with her courage increasing, walked straight on along the lava-strewn slope, veering neither to the right nor to the left.

Then she stopped, transfixed. The noise of pounding hoofs saluted her.

"Walk straight on!" Snowflake whispered. "I'm willing to bet my hat that's Mad Charley coming with the cowboys; but if you stop one of these Apaches may take a notion to shoot at you!"

And so she walked on again, while Snowflake crept close after her, and the sound of the pounding hoofs grew louder.

Then a charging cheer arose. But it was not the cheer of cowboys; it was the welcome of Uncle Sam's troopers!

The horsemen galloped up the slope, guided by Mad Charley, but drew rein with startling suddenness when they

beheld the shining figure speeding in ghostly fashion along the hillside.

It was absolutely certain to Snowflake that the Apaches were getting away from there as fast as they could; therefore he called out, making his presence known, and Huldah turned toward the soldiers.

A minute later she was conversing with them, thus proving to them that this ghost-like figure was in reality a very intelligent and attractive young woman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ORRIN JUDE'S PERILOUS POSITION.

No man knew better than Orrin Jude how great was his peril on the ranch after the departure of Miss Huldah and her escort. The Ranch King had re-elevated him to the position of foreman, but all the new cowboys were his deadly enemies, for they were not really cowboys, but members of Tiger Dan's band, there at the behest of Arthur Benson.

Still, Orrin Jude did not hesitate in going forward in what he considered to be his duty.

The day passed peaceably enough, though there was a wicked look in the eyes of more than one of the outlaws, and more than once Orrin Jude dropped a hand to the revolver at his hip, thinking the expected fight had come.

When it did come, however, it was in a shape entirely different from what he had anticipated.

Apache Jim, a half-breed who had been for a long time on the ranch, and heretofore considered reliable, leaped out on him from a bunkroom, that evening after dark, and attacked him with a knife.

Orrin Jude fell back and lifted his pistol, but he changed his intention, and, shifting it in his hand, tried to strike the Apache on the head with the butt of it, instead of shooting him.

The Apache was as wild as a Malay running amuck. A snarl that was fiendish escaped his lips, and he leaped again toward Orrin, striking viciously.

"Stand back!" cried the foreman, "or I'll kill you! You're drunk, I reckon, Jim; but that don't make any difference. I ain't a-goin' to let you knife me!"

But Apache Jim was not in a mood to heed this advice, and his knife hand went up again.

As it came down the butt of the revolver fell across the fingers, almost mashing them, and the knife dropped to the sand.

Then Orrin Jude closed with the fellow, and a desperate struggle ensued, in which strength and dexterity alone could prevail.

How it might have terminated cannot be known. The Apache cried out for help.

Arthur Benson ran forward out of the darkness and dealt Orrin Jude a stinging blow over the head.

Orrin was fast choking the half-breed into insensibility. Now he relaxed his grip and turned on this new foe.

Apache Jim fell to the ground, too weak and too near done up to stand.

"What does this mean?"

"It means that if you hadn't come I'd 'a' killed that feller, jist as he tried to kill me!"

Apache Jim tried to get on his feet, and gurgled a few words.

"You're discharged from this ranch!" Arthur cried to Orrin.

"Not till the old boss says so, I ain't! I've quit takin' my orders from you, Mr. Arthur!"

"I tell you, you've got to leave this ranch!"

"Thankee! I'm workin' fer the rightful owner, an' when he says 'go' I'm a-goin'." Till then, hyer I stay!"

He glanced about, not knowing but the Apache half-breed would recover sufficiently to renew the attack, or that some other of the desperadoes of Tiger Dan would jump into the row.

But Apache Jim had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AFFAIRS IN FLAGSTAFF.

It was impossible for the troopers to successfully pursue the Apaches, because of the darkness.

A detail of men was left to follow them in the morning, while it was determined that the others should go on to Flagstaff.

For various reasons, Miss Huldah and her escort accompanied this latter party, reaching Flagstaff the next afternoon.

From that point Huldah returned to the ranch, in a stage that was guarded by troopers.

Mad Charley was treated to a genuine surprise by finding Moll Almack in Flagstaff, when he had supposed her at the ranch.

She had arrived only a short time before, and was able to give him news of the fight which Orrin Jude had had with Apache Jim, and declared her belief that terrible trouble for the ranch was impending.

Flagstaff was in a blaze of excitement. The war scare was at its height. The Eastern newspapers were filled with exaggerated accounts of what was being done and threatening to be done. Several detachments of troopers were in the field. Some settlers had been killed, and one of the marauding band of Apaches had been struck and severely punished.

But Snowflake Sam had other things to engross his attention.

The pretended Arthur Benson was in possession of the ranch; and, knowing what course to pursue, Snowflake Sam visited a lawyer.

After hearing the entire story, this lawyer declared that Snowflake Sam had lost much and had jeopardized his chances by his delay, but that he might yet win.

At the lawyer's suggestion, Snowflake Sam took steps to trace the record of the false Arthur Benson, and soon afterward discovered that Arthur had appeared some months before in Flagstaff, coming there, as it was then said, from Silver City.

As Snowflake Sam left the lawyer's office, he heard a succession of pistol shots and an ear-splitting yell, and saw Mad Charley mounted on a livery stable pony, cavorting up and down the streets, and firing his pistol into the air.

Snowflake Sam was vexed and disgusted.

"Of all fools a drunken fool is the biggest! He's been painting his insides red with liquor, and now he wants to paint the town!"

Mad Charley came tearing back, and Snowflake, planting himself in the middle of the street, tried to stop him; but the only effect was to arouse Mad Charley's pugnacity and set him to whooping and howling worse than ever.

Snowflake Sam's disgust gave way to a feeling of indignation, however, when he learned, soon afterward, that men friendly to the Tiger band had, without doubt, got Mad Charley into his present disgraceful state through a trick, by putting liquor into a supposed temperance drink that had been served him at breakfast.

As night drew on, he seemed to grow more and more reckless. He metaphorically put a chip on his shoulder and rode up and down the streets vowing that he was the biggest man between the Little Colorado and the Mexican line, and that he could lick anything that could walk, hop, jump, or fly.

"Whoop! I'm the Jimplecute from Jimson Creek! I'm the howling Hoodoo from the Gila! (Pronounced Heela!) I'm the Cinnamon Bear from Silver City! Climb my collar, won't you?"

Though the challenge rung out stentoriously, no one in Flagstaff cared to "climb his collar."

Occasionally Mad Charley cooled down long enough to dismount and "likker up," and once he put the pony back in the livery stable and continued his "circuit acting" on foot.

But when the lights flashed in the streets and the music "fiddled" in the saloons, and the frolic and festivities of border-town life began to assert themselves, he got the pony out and again raced up and down.

Passing the Silver Brick Saloon, where the lights were shining with uncommon brilliance, and where a large number of men were gathered, Mad Charley became suddenly inspired with an idea.

He lifted his shaggy head and emitted a roar of delight.

Then he turned the head of the pony toward the front entrance of the Silver Bar; and, applying the spurs with vigor, forced the animal up the steps and into the building itself.

The astonished men at the door fell back at this performance.

Steadying himself on the back of his bronco, Mad Charley uttered another howl, that fairly lifted the rafters and caused some of those within to draw their weapons and others to duck down behind the billiard tables; and then, deliberately pulling his revolver, he began to shoot out the lights.

The utmost confusion prevailed. Men tumbled out of the house through the windows and doors, while others crawled back under the bar, or tried to conceal themselves beneath chairs, choosing the flimsiest shelter in the fright of the moment.

But Mad Charley was rudely interrupted in this frolic. He felt himself caught by the arm, the pistol jerked out of his hand, and himself dragged from the saddle and sent spinning to the floor.

He got on his feet with drunken gravity, and felt for the pistol that was on the other hip.

Before he could draw it a hand shot out, which caught him between the eyes and bowled him over half senseless.

By the time he had partially recovered the courageous individual who had handled him so unceremoniously was relighting the lamps that were not ruined, and trying to restore order.

Mad Charley felt for his "guns," and finding them gone, glared at the man in a sort of malignant stupefaction. He knew he had been knocked out, and his rage passed all bounds.

He knew the man well; knew him to be a member of Tiger Dan's band!

"I'll kill ye fer that, Jim Rowan!" he hissed, staggering to his feet.

"Some one gimme a gun or a knife! I'll kill him fer that!"

The saloon was refilling; the scared crowd streaming in again from the streets, now that it perceived the danger to have passed.

In this crowd, having but just joined it, was Snowflake Sam.

He heard Mad Charley's threat. Knowing Mad Charley had been in the wrong from the first, he pushed forward and laid a hand on his shoulder, at the same time assisting him to rise.

"You're to blame in this thing, Charley. Now, you must go with me!"

Mad Charley looked into the eyes of his friend, with anger at first; but Snowflake Sam's cool words restored him to a degree of sense. He glanced over the room, saw the gathering crowd, and heard the mutterings of anger against him.

Then he permitted Snowflake Sam to lead him from the place.

The two went to the room of Snowflake Sam, but Mad Charley refused to go to bed; and, after a little, got out of the house and struck out into the town again.

Snowflake Sam lost all patience.

"Let him go! If he gets himself into a hobble it's his lookout, and not mine!"

He retired and sought to forget in sleep the unpleasant incident.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COURT OF JUDGE LYNCH.

Shortly after daybreak Snowflake Sam was aroused by sounds of a tumult.

Looking out of his window he saw

that a mob had gathered, and that they had in their midst some man held as a prisoner.

He got into his clothes as quick as he could, and emerged into the street; and then he discovered that the man held by the mob was Mad Charley.

Jim Rowan had been found murdered in the street that morning, and Mad Charley was accused of the deed.

Circumstantial evidence against the accused was very strong. He had threatened Rowan's life in the Silver Brick Saloon, but a few hours before; and Rowan had been struck in the back with a knife, apparently as he was on his way to his boarding house shortly before daylight.

Snowflake Sam was sure Mad Charley was not guilty of the crime; though Mad Charley at that moment looked as if he might be equal to anything. He had been roughly handled by the mob, his hair and clothing were in a tumbled condition, and his face showed signs of the debauch through which he had passed.

The mob passed on up the street, and entered a rough, shanty-like structure, that was temporarily unoccupied, and adapted to the need of the hour.

Snowflake Sam was in a quandary. He wanted to get Mad Charley out of this scrape, but knew not what course to pursue. All he could do, apparently, was to enter the shanty with the others and watch for an opportunity to serve the imperilled man.

The crowd grew until almost the entire town was included, and the excitement increased until the mob spirit ran so high that it looked as if Mad Charley was to be hung without even the shadow of an investigation, notwithstanding that he protested his innocence.

"Let us hear the proof first!" Snowflake Sam urged of one who stood by him; and this man took up the cry, and was joined by others.

Mad Charley was placed in the centre of the room unbound, but all about the room fingers were on revolvers ready to shoot him down if he made any attempt at escape.

Though Jim Rowan was a member of the band of Tiger Dan, he had been also a citizen of Flagstaff, and he had borne himself so well outwardly that he had been regarded by many as a worthy man.

He had a son in Flagstaff who was almost grown.

The grief of this boy had passed all bounds on learning of the death of his father.

Now this grief was changing to a rage that demanded the death of the murderer, and the boy was diligently searching for proofs of Mad Charley's guilt.

A man who had been by turns miner, cowboy, teamster, and lumberman, was installed as Judge Lynch, and took his seat on a wooden chair, which was hoisted to the top of an empty dry goods box.

There, lifted above the crowd, he presided with all the dignity at his command, which was precious little, and seemed to feel the high-mightiness of his position as much as if he were a king on a gilded throne.

In ordinary life this particular Judge Lynch bore the name of Cherry Brandy—that having been at one time considered his favorite tippie—what his real name was no one seemed to know.

"Order!" cried Cherry Brandy, stamping with one heavy boot. "Gentlemen, we can't do a tarnation thing less'n you gits down quiet! This hyer is a serious charge, which will have to—that is to say, it's not ever' day that a man and citizen gits it in the back in this hyer style; an' therefore we'll have to consider the—the—Tom Scroggins, will you keep still over there, er shell I have to order the sheriff to put ye out?"

Judge Lynch forgot to continue his opening address, after having given this squelcher to Tom Scroggins, and before he could quite make up his mind what

next to do a bustle was heard in the doorway.

Toby Rowan, the son of the murdered man, appeared, accompanied by a robust miner, who carried in his hand a bloody handkerchief.

It was seen by all that Toby Rowan and the miner, whose name was Willard Jones, brought important evidence.

The crowd fell back with hushed expectancy.

Toby Rowan, whose excitement was at a fever pitch, leaped upon a chair; and, sweeping his eyes over the room, turned to Judge Lynch, and then pointed to the bloody handkerchief, which Jones was extending for inspection.

Mad Charley saw the handkerchief.

"What confounded plot is this?" he exclaimed, taking a forward step.

The words of the excited boy fairly hurled him back.

"It's not a plot, Judge Lynch! That's his bloody handkerchief, and he knows it! He's the murderer!"

"It's a lie!" declared Mad Charley, though he fell back as he said it. "That's my handkerchief, but I never killed Jim Rowan! I hadn't any reason to. He was a friend of mine. We quarreled last night, and I threatened him, but that was because I was drunk!"

"Good temperance lesson, that is!" said Cherry Brandy. "Never look on the wine when it's red!"

This remark of Judge Lynch's passed almost unheeded, because of the excitement.

"Where did ye find that air hankerchief, Toby?" was Judge Lynch's patronizing query. "He acknowledges that it's hissen!"

Toby Rowan and Willard Jones both spoke at once.

"We found it clost to the spot where the murder was done. It had that blood and sand on, as you see! We recognized it, for it was a handkerchief he wore around his neck when he was on that high lonesome yisterday!"

A great cry of rage went up from the people gathered in the shanty, and Snowflake Sam knew that the die was cast. No more evidence was needed to condemn Mad Charley to the hangman's noose.

But there was one in the town who had been busy ever since the mob spirit had started, working in Mad Charley's behalf, and whose work was destined to bear fruit.

This was Moll Almack, Mad Charley's sweetheart.

She had feared that his spree of the previous day would bear bitter fruit; and, after the quarrel with Jim Rowan, whom she knew to be one of Tiger Dan's men, she had remained up throughout the night, watching, watching, almost certain that some of the Tigers in the town would take advantage of the opportunity made to bring about the death of the man they now hated.

She had not been long on the watch when she discovered that Apache Jim was in the town, and that he had slipped in during the evening.

Of all the enemies Mad Charley had, Apache Jim was the worst. And not a member of Tiger Dan's band but desired the death of Mad Charley, since he had proven false to them.

Moll Almack disguised herself in men's clothing and endeavored to shadow Apache Jim. She did not succeed; but she knew when Mad Charley went to his room; and, though this was at a late hour, she was sure it was before the killing of Jim Rowan.

In her heart she was certain Apache Jim was the real murderer—that he had been egged on by the Tigers to kill Rowan secretly, and cast suspicion on Mad Charley, as this would be sure to deliver him into the hands of Judge Lynch.

While the mob was forming, Moll Almack, in her own proper garb, was searching the streets of the town for Apache Jim, and at last she came on him.

CHAPTER XXX.

APACHE JIM IN A CLOSE CORNER.

A hot light shone behind the pupils of Moll Almack's eyes as her gaze lighted on the half-breed, and she moved quickly forward, that he might not escape her.

Apache Jim had come out of the rear door of a saloon.

There he stood for a moment, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, and then he turned down a side street as if he had thoughts of getting out of the town.

Moll Almack hurried on after him, and Jim was not aware he was being pursued until her voice reached him.

He stopped and looked around; and, as he did so, she pulled a small revolver out of the pocket of her dress, and, cocking it, leveled it at his head.

"Go right on, Jim!" she whispered. "There's Healy Murtigan's office right over there. When you get to it, I want you to turn up that stairway, and I'll follow you. I want to have a talk with you. Mind, now, if you make a break I'll shoot you!"

Apache Jim was much frightened, and seemed on the point of making a break for his liberty; but, if such a notion was in his mind, he reconsidered it, and walked quietly on in advance of her until he came to the door leading to Healy Murtigan's office.

Moll Almack followed, holding the revolver ready cocked in the fold of her dress, and trying to look cool and unconcerned, though her pulses were bounding and her brain seemed on fire.

She was in earnest in saying she would shoot Apache Jim if he tried to run. She would have shot him dead, regardless of the consequences.

Apache Jim knew this, and he only stopped at the foot of the stairway long enough to look back, and then scudded up stairs, she still following him.

Healy Murtigan was a big-stomached Irishman, whose aldermanic proportions would have done well as a suggestion for a Puck cartoon.

He was the political member of the band of Tiger Dan; the man who looked after the interests of the outlaws in Flagstaff, and who always could be relied on to do his best to get them out of legal scrapes. In addition, he was the "fence" through whom they disposed of much of their stolen plunder.

Moll Almack had seen him enter, his office, and she now opened the door and stood aside and let the half-breed enter, keeping at his heels and closing the door after them.

Healy Murtigan faced around in his chair. He was only up there for a moment, and did not want to be disturbed, as he desired to look in on the work of Judge Lynch as soon as he could.

Moll placed herself before Murtigan. He knew her well as the daughter of "Tiger Dan."

"I want you to go down right now and save Mad Charley! You can do it!"

"But he's a traitor—worse'n a traitor—a spy! He ought to be hung!"

"He didn't kill that man, and I know that 'Pache Jim here did. He must be saved. If you don't do it, I'll get up and reveal everything. As the daughter of Tiger Dan I'll be listened to!"

"You wouldn't be so big a fool, I reckon!" Murtigan blurted.

He got out of the big revolving chair, a tremor of fear smiting him.

Apache Jim looked dogged and sullen. "It's one big lie!" he asserted. "I never knife that man! Why for I knife him?"

Again the little revolver came out of the folds of the woman's dress.

"You knifed him because you were ordered to do it!"

She turned again to Healy Murtigan.

"You can take your choice, Murtigan! Do what I tell you, or I'll denounce you as one of Tiger Dan's men, and open the eyes of the Flagstaff people so wide that they can't help seeing some things they've

never dreamed about. I 'low a lynching bee would follow it, but Mad Charley wouldn't be the one lynched!"

The small, restless eyes of Apache Jim roved toward the window as if he had thoughts of flinging himself through it, but that threatening little revolver held him still.

The fat face of Healy Murtigan took on a sallow, sickly look, and his trembling so increased that his knees shook till he felt them sinking under him.

"This is a most preposterous—uh—queer sort of a request! Now, don't you think it is, Moll Almack?"

"Not when Apache Jim is guilty and an innocent man is on the point of being hung—maybe is being hung this minute. We can't wait!"

She turned her head to catch the cries that came up from the building where the mob had congregated.

"There's not a moment to lose, Healy Murtigan! If you won't take Apache Jim down there, I will. Better do it, though, I warn you!"

"Go on!" Murtigan ordered, motioning to the half-breed, who looked more than ever as if he desired to leap out of the window.

"No tricks, Apache!" Moll Almack warned. "If you do they'll not get a chance to hang you down there!"

She had endeavored to remain cool, but she could control her feelings no longer. Those cries from the mob sent the blood tingling through her veins and excited her fears. She was in a desperate, determined mood, and her looks showed it.

Both Healy Murtigan and Apache Jim stepped along in front of her, forced forward as much by her intense earnestness and will power as by her threats.

In a little while they stood before the door of the shanty.

"No flunking now!" she warned, hissing the words into Murtigan's ear.

Then she pressed close to Apache Jim, and clicked the cylinder of the revolver so that he could hear it.

"Here's the murderer, men of Flagstaff! Apache Jim stabbed Rowan, and he'll not deny it. He don't dare to!"

The announcement created a tremendous sensation, and Apache Jim, rousing from the spell that had bound him, made a dash to get away.

The action was taken as a confession of guilt, and a dozen hands were put forth to restrain him.

Cherry Brandy tumbled off his judgment seat, and the boy, Toby Rowan, made a quick dash for the door.

Judge Lynch's jury had just reached the decision that Mad Charley was guilty and should be hung.

Apache Jim was struggling in the hands of those who had laid hold of him, Moll Almack was pointing toward him like an avenging Nemesis, and Healy Murtigan, with cheeks growing more and more the color of tallow candles, stood near, shivering, but silent.

"What's the meanin' of this?" Cherry Brandy cried, leaping through the doorway.

Moll Almack repeated her charge.

Those who held the half-breed pushed him forward in front of Judge Lynch.

The look on the half-breed's face showed that he was the guilty party. He cowered like a veritable craven.

"I was drunk," he said. "They give me whiskey—"

To keep him from saying more, a man staggered against him, pushed by one behind, and a temporary confusion ensued that stopped this damaging confession.

Before Apache Jim could recommence, or quiet be restored, a horseman came galloping up the street, and, stopping in the edge of the crowd, swung out of the saddle.

It was a cowboy anxious to see and learn what was going on, excited by the stories he had heard.

Apache Jim's fear gave him a reckless courage. He snatched a knife from the

belt of the man nearest him, struck the man down with it, and dived for the horse.

Throwing himself into the saddle, he swung to the horse's opposite side, so that only a foot was thrust up as a target for the pistols of his foes.

Then he jabbed the point of the knife sharply into the horse's flank.

The horse leaped as if stung by a snake, and raced up the street at a pace it had never before equaled.

Before the astonished crowd could quite get into their heads what had happened Apache Jim had swung around the first corner and was screened from their sight by a building.

When he appeared again he was sitting upright in the saddle, with the reins in his hands, and, cruelly using the knife as a spur, was riding like the wind for the adjacent hills, and the shelter of the pines.

A volley of shots flew after him, but he sped on, apparently unharmed.

There was mounting in hot haste, and a furious chase commenced. But the horse Apache Jim had was a good one, and the Apache was fleeing for his life.

In an hour the pursuers came trailing back, one at a time, reporting that Apache Jim had escaped.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RANCH KING'S AWAKENING.

Benson, the Ranch King, lifted himself on his pillow, listened in a vague and dreamy way to the words that floated to him, and then looked inquiringly about the room. The impression was on him that his daughter, Huldah, had just left it; and this impression was correct.

The impression was also on the Ranch King that he was rousing out of a severe sickness; and, while his faculties were clear, he had a feeling that they had not been clear so very long before.

The previous evening, after an excited outburst, in which he had been scolding furiously, Benson had thrown up his hands and fallen in a dead faint.

Carried to his room, he had sunk into a stupor, from which he had only partially aroused at intervals, and he was still supposed by the people of the place to be in that condition.

All this Benson did not know; but he did know that the words, which now reached him more clearly, were very peculiarly phrased, to say the least of it.

Arthur Benson was talking to some stranger; and, though the conversation was in guarded tones, yet, as they sat in the adjoining room, it came through the partition plainly enough.

"When I was down in Frisco, knocking about there under the name of Bert Lisbon, you know I told you that if we could work the thing I'd be in a condition to pay you big!"

"And hardly a red cent have I got yet!" the other growled.

Benson lifted himself still higher on his pillow. He fancied he knew that other voice.

"What about the thousand that I paid you in the timber just out of Flagstaff, no longer than a week ago? Do you call that nothing? And a short time before that I gave you five hundred! That's as much as that last bunch of cattle brought me!"

"But there was to be an even divvy!"

"And there will be, Dan! Don't you worry about that. I'm doing just as well as I can. You must let me stay here and work the racket at this end of the line, while you hide out and continue to help me in your way. I'm getting things in pretty good shape here!"

"Well, I'll allow you've pulled the wool over the eyes of the ol' man mighty nice, fer a fact! Benson always was an old fool, and he's gettin' worse the older he grows!"

Arthur laughed in his harsh, disagreeable way.

"Well, you know I never was counted an idiot!"

"No; when you used to run with the boys they always said you was the slick-

est one in the band, an' I reckon they was jist about right on that score. They called you the tiger's cub, then; and you was kinder proud of the title!"

"And now, I'm the son of Benson, the Ranch King. I've worn so many *aliases* that I'm almost afraid, sometimes, that I'll slip up and forget which one of the boys I am. When I was with you I was the tiger's cub and Billy Bright-Eyes. In New York I was Keeny, the card sharp. In Frisco I was Bert Lisbon, the king of the confidence men. And here I'm Arthur Benson, son of the Honorable William Benson, the ranchman, who has more acres and cattle than he can count or knows what to do with!"

Benson had lifted himself higher and higher; the horrified expression on his face deepening, his cheeks growing whiter, his eyes bigger and shinier; and now, uttering a shriek, he fell back on the pillow, as unconscious as he had been an hour before.

Arthur Benson and the man he had been talking to, who was none other than Tiger Dan, heard the Ranch King's agonizing cry, and rushed into the room, where they found him senseless and apparently dead.

The cry had likewise penetrated to the apartments below, and Huldah and Moxie rushed to the scene.

Restoratives were applied and efforts made to bring the Ranch King out of his state of insensibility, though it must be confessed that Arthur's heart was not in this work.

Huldah was almost frantic.

The efforts made were finally successful, and the Ranch King, opening his eyes, stared about the room.

As his gaze fell on Arthur he uttered another cry and shrunk against the pillow. His eyes, roving over the room, failed to note the form of Tiger Dan, whom he half expected to see.

A violent trembling seized him.

He controlled it with an effort and seemed to be summoning all his strength. Looking uneasily from one to the other, he finally asked that he might be left alone with Arthur.

Not one of the three yet observed that the Ranch King was restored to his full mental faculties.

When Huldah and Moxie had gone out, Benson weakly motioned to a chair.

Arthur sat down; and for a moment the two men silently looked at each other.

The color was slowly coming into Benson's face, his eyes were brightening again, and his fingers nervously twitching.

"What I am going to say will make you want to kill me!" he began, and his voice was so strained, yet so earnest, that Arthur got up from the chair in alarm.

"You'll not kill me, though; for there is a will in existence, of which you don't know, which gives all my property to Huldah, in the event of my death!"

He could see that the shot took effect.

"What are you talking about, father?" advancing, with affected tenderness. "You must still be wandering!"

"My head is as clear as a bell, and my hearing is good! I heard you talking in that room a while ago! You and Tiger Dan! I know the villain; for he and I have come into collision a number of times in the last five years. Once he tried to kill me, but he wasn't man enough for Benson!"

"You're as crazy as a loon! What are you talking about? I have had no conversation with Tiger Dan or any one else!"

"I want to speak with you a few words only," Benson went on. "That talk in there told me how big a fool I've been! I'm not crazy, and I'll be a fool no longer. I thought you the son that left me so many years ago, when you're nothing but a black-hearted scoundrel!"

"Now, I want you to get out of this house and off this ranch as quick as you can! If you don't, I'll have the cowboys

seize you and hang you without judge or jury!"

"And for Tiger Dan—"

A form darkened the doorway, and Tiger Dan came into the room. He had heard all from the adjoining apartment.

"What is it you want with Tiger Dan?"

A flush of anger came into Arthur's face, and he mentally cursed Tiger Dan for his folly in appearing at that time. Nevertheless, he said, with assumed coolness:

"My father has fallen into one of his regular crazy spells. He thinks you are Tiger Dan, the outlaw; when I know that you're only an honest man, down here from Flagstaff to see me on a bit of business."

Tiger Dan took his cue and winked.

"C'rect you air! I'm John Simonson, drover and stock buyer from Albuquerque, come here to see if I couldn't buy some cattle!"

"Get out of this room, both of you! And send Huldah here! Do you hear?"

"I never saw him quite so bad as this!" declared Arthur. "I have been dreading an outbreak like this, though, for he's been getting worse for some time. I see I'll have to have him put in an asylum, much as I hate to!"

Benson knew this was a threat, but it did not daunt him.

"Get out of this room! Instantly! Leave my sight! If you don't, as sure as there's a God I'll crawl out of here and shoot both of you as soon as I can get my hands on a pistol!"

"He's so bad, I reckon we'd better let him alone a while!"

"Correct!" assented Tiger Dan, winking again. "He's most turrible bad. That kind of an attack kills people sometimes, and I allow if it hangs on he'll go out sudden one of these hyer days!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RANCH KING'S DEFIANCE.

The strength of the Ranch King deserted him the moment Arthur and Tiger Dan were out of the room. He fell back on the pillow, panting for breath and hardly equal to the task of lifting a finger.

Arthur went into the room below, where he met Huldah, who was on the point of mounting the stairs.

"I wouldn't go up there now," he urged. "I've just come from the room. He's resting quietly and oughtn't to be disturbed!"

Huldah turned back, and Arthur and Tiger Dan walked out into the yard and over toward the bunk houses.

There had been such a change in the personnel of the ranch force that, with the exception of Orrin Jude, hardly one of the original cowboys remained. Tiger Dan's men had taken their places.

Orrin, however, still declared himself to be the ranch foreman; and gave his orders, which were sometimes obeyed and sometimes not; and blustered and stormed around in a generally exasperating way, which put him in constant danger of being shot or assassinated.

Huldah, who knew what was going on, had earnestly prayed for the return of Snowflake Sam, though she equally dreaded his coming, knowing it would place him in peril.

If ever a girl held a trying position it was Huldah Benson during these last few hours. However, Moxie stood by her faithfully, and that was a comfort.

By slow degrees the strength of the Ranch King came back, and he began to ponder the situation. He was ready to believe that, but for the information given Arthur of the fact that the ranch property was all willed to Huldah, he would have been killed by this pretended heir and Tiger Dan.

But he was safe now for a time.

As his mind grew clearer, he began to recollect things, that came to him first in a dreamy way and then were freed of their mists.

In this manner he recalled Snowflake Sam's presence on the ranch.

"I'll have to fight my own battles! I wonder if Orrin is here?"

He crawled out of bed; and, with shaky hands, proceeded to array himself in the clothing he found in his wardrobe.

Looking into a mirror, he saw that his eyes were bloodshot and his features ghastly, and that his appearance certainly indicated an absence of sanity.

"I'll fight for my rights! I'll not be robbed!" he gasped.

Crossing the room, he took down a Winchester and a belt of cartridges from the wall, and carefully loaded the weapon.

The exertion tired him very much, and he dropped into an easy chair, near the foot of the bed, where he sat, with rifle resting across his lap, looking toward the door.

In the meantime, the scoundrel who was calling himself Arthur Benson, accompanied by Tiger Dan, had got some of the new cowboys together in one of the bunk houses and was acquainting them with Benson's outbreak.

"We've got to capture him now, before he has a chance to make Huldah understand that he's not crazy; and bind him and carry him off! We can lodge him in an asylum that I know of in the vicinity of Frisco, where he'll be as good as dead."

A plan was quickly formed.

Like wildfire the information spread over the grounds that Benson had become violently insane and was threatening with death those who would not agree with him; that he had ordered Arthur to leave the place, and was claiming that the very excellent stockman, Mr. Simonson, from Albuquerque, was Tiger Dan!

Unfortunately, Orrin Jude had never seen Tiger Dan undisguised, and accepted the story that Tiger Dan was a stock buyer.

Miss Moxie heard one of the cowboys say the ranchman had gone insane, and that they were going to tie him, and she ran with the startling news to Miss Huldah.

The latter, filled with the awful fear that the mind of her adopted father had departed from him forever, rushed hastily for the stairway.

She met Arthur there, with some cowboys at his heels.

"I don't think it best for you to go up there! Your father is violently insane, and ordered me out of the room awhile ago, threatening to shoot me! And one of the cowboys, who climbed up the piazza and peeped into the room, says he is sitting there with a Winchester ready to shoot the first one that appears!"

Huldah gave a little cry, tore past him, and bounded up the stairs.

Arthur sought to detain her, and, when he found he could not, he followed her as rapidly as possible, the cowboys tramping along at his heels.

Huldah flung open the door, and was stricken with terror to see her father sitting in the rocker, dressed, and with that rifle in his grasp.

"Come in!" he said. "They're down there, are they? I guessed what they'd be up to, and I heard them talking just now!"

Though he was very pale, his voice was not shaky, and there was not a tremor of his nerves. The Ranch King had suddenly become sinewed with steel.

The tramp of the men was heard on the stairway.

"Put your head out, Huldah, and tell them I'll kill the first one that tries to come through that door. This is my house, and I am its master. I'll not be dragged out of it by anybody!"

Huldah was bewildered and panic-stricken.

Hardly knowing what she did she thrust her head out and cried:

"For the love of heaven, don't come up! He's got a Winchester, and he says

he'll shoot the first man that comes through the door!"

"That's what I will!" Benson called, in a tone loud enough to be heard.

The men stopped and began to talk.

"He is crazy, Huldah! There's no use parleying with him! We'll have to capture him in some way, and take him to an asylum, or where he can be guarded and treated. He's sure to kill somebody if he's left here!"

Huldah had drawn her head back into the room, and now she looked at the Ranch King.

He tried to smile.

"You needn't believe anything they say, Huldah. The truth is my head is better than it has been for a long time. I'm no crazier than you are; not a bit! That big man out there is Tiger Dan, the outlaw. I heard them talking in the other room. That other man is not Arthur Benson, my son, but a grand scoundrel and hypocrite, who used to be known in San Francisco as Bert Lisbon."

The manner and attitude of the girl changed. She knew how hollow were the claims of this pretended heir—for had she not heard and believed the story of Snowflake Sam?

She came softly into the room and closed the door after her, slipping the bolt into place.

"I believe you, father. I can see that you're not crazy. Oh, I am so glad that your mind has cleared!"

She came tremblingly forward, and, kneeling down, kissed him.

When she stood up, there were tears in her eyes, but there was in them, also, a defiant light.

"I'll stand by you to the last, father! And we have Orrin Jude and Moxie on our side!"

"Are you going to let us in, or shall we batter in the door?"

Hardly had Arthur's question been put when a clattering of hoofs was heard out on the Flagstaff trail, and Apache Jim came in sight, riding as if the very Old Nick were after him.

Apache Jim had crowded his horse hard, since leaving Flagstaff, and the animal was now ready to drop in its tracks.

He leaped down, when he came near the house, and did not take time to remove the saddle or bridle.

This strange action brought an exclamation from the men below, with a call to Arthur to come down and see what was the matter.

Flinging a threat at the door which stood between him and the Ranch King, Arthur Benson and the cowboys tramped down the stairway to ascertain what new turn fortune's wheel had been given.

Apache Jim, rolling his eyes now and then up the trail toward Flagstaff, shiveringly told of his escape from Judge Lynch.

A sudden thought came into Arthur's mind.

"I'll stand by you, Jim. You can count on me, and you can count on the boys. If you're followed here we'll give those fellows a big fight before they get you!"

Orrin Jude, having heard from Moxie something of what had occurred above stairs, took advantage of this opportunity to go up to the Ranch King's room.

He tapped on the door, announced himself, and was admitted by Huldah.

He stared at Benson, and a pleasurable look came into his face when he beheld the saner light in Benson's eyes.

"I'm mighty glad to see you lookin' so well this morning, an' so chipper, with that gun in yer hands, like the old fightin' days had come back. Well, I'm afraid we're goin' to have a nasty row before we git through with this thing; and I'm hyer to say that when it comes you can count on Orrin Jude to do his duty, as long as there's breath in his body!"

"I knew I could depend on you, Orrin! You're a brave and faithful fellow! As you say, I'm afraid we're going to have trouble!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WORK OF APACHE JIM.

Having assured Apache Jim of his friendship and determination to stand by him, Arthur Benson took the half-breed aside and questioned him closely concerning occurrences at Flagstaff.

Apache Jim told him all, so far as he knew, of what had occurred, and made clear the fear he felt at being pursued and lynched by the mob.

"Unless we stand by each other, Jim, we're gone! You need my help, and I need yours. Will you stand by me and do as I tell you, if I promise to get you out of this scrape?"

The half-breed was ready to agree to anything.

"You're an Apache, Jim, even if you are a cowboy! Your mother is a full-blood and she lives with some of these chaps that have been doing this raiding. I know you can find those Apaches, if you want to. Find them! Lead some of them here! Make a dash, burn everything, and kill the old man!"

Apache Jim drew back. The scheme was almost too reckless for even him to undertake it.

Arthur Benson went over it carefully, showing him how it could be done, and impressing on him more and more how perilous was his present position, and how he must give help for help.

Before he closed he saw he had conquered.

"You'll do it?"

Apache Jim nodded his head.

"Don't let any grass grow under your feet!"

The half-breed waved a hand toward the southwest, indicating the direction in which he believed his people to be; then he walked softly to where some ponies were grazing.

As he went along he picked up a bit of rope.

The ponies knew him; and, selecting the swiftest and best, he made a hackamore of the rope, which he put over its head, and then scrambled to its back.

"Where is that half-breed going?" a cowboy asked.

"He's afraid to stay here, thinking a mob will be after him; and I told him he'd better pick out a pony and clear out while he had time."

At Arthur's command, the saddle and bridle were removed from the pony Apache Jim had ridden from Flagstaff. It was turned into a herd grazing near, and instructions were given to the men what story to tell in case the half-breed's pursuers came.

Apache Jim disappeared in a cloud of dust, and Arthur Benson returned to his plotting, wondering how he should proceed to get the Ranch King out of his room.

While all this was occurring Snowflake Sam was riding out of Flagstaff, having resolved to go again to the ranch and there fight out the battle face to face with the pretended heir.

Darkness fell when not more than two-thirds of the way had been traversed, and when he was still five miles or more from the ranch buildings he was startled to see a glow against the sky, which resembled markedly that other glow that had told of the previous destruction at the ranch.

With his fears excited, Snowflake Sam spurred on, covering the five miles in a very short time.

He found his worst fears realized. The ranch house was on fire.

In its light he beheld two figures—that of a man and a woman, and when he arrived he found Orrin Jude and Huldah in a state of great distress and excitement.

Apache Jim had struck swiftly. He had not gone a dozen miles from the ranch before he encountered a band of the very wretches he was seeking. They were young Apache bucks on the war path, who had been contemplating a blow at Benson's ranch, but, fearing to deliver it, had been lying for a whole day in a canyon of the mountains in hesitation.

The words of Apache Jim inspired them with courage.

Led by him, they made the raid, dashing in and striking a blow that he knew would be felt.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WITH THE APACHES.

Let us turn back to the incidents of this raid.

It had been a day of surprises and excitements. The Ranch King still held the fort. He was not in the chair with the rifle, but he had so thoroughly convinced the villains that were backing Arthur of his intentions to kill the first man who came up the stairway that not one of them had made the venture.

They had talked and threatened a good deal, and had then gone away; and were heard conferring out at the bunk houses.

When it was seen there was to be no attack, the trio in the upper room had a long and earnest talk on the situation, and the conversation was continued when they were joined by Moxie.

They believed that Arthur would bring about some sort of compromise, or else would try to take the house by assault.

But Arthur did neither. He was relying on Apache Jim, and when night came on, he sent most of the cowboys a dozen miles off to the northwest, to Habee's ranch, where they were to make their presence known, and where they were to remain, so that afterward it could be proven they had had no hand in the Apache raid.

Arthur expected no raid until near morning, and indeed it was his idea that two or three days might go by before the half-breed could strike the promised blow.

Therefore, when the raid was made, and the Apaches charged the house yelling like fiends and carrying all before them, Arthur Benson was employing himself about the corrals, Orrin Jude was tethering some ponies in a hollow a half mile distant, and no one was in the house except the old Ranch King and the two women.

Miss Moxie heard the cry of the Indians, and fell back with a screech when the door of the kitchen was thrust open and the treacherous face of an Apache was thrust in.

The Apache scared her into silence by drawing a knife and waving it suggestively; and, almost before she knew it, Miss Moxie felt his fingers on her throat, one of his rough hands over her lips, and was dragged by him out of the room.

The apartment of the Ranch King had been invaded at the same time, and he was borne away at almost the same moment futilely fighting and struggling.

The Apaches vanished almost as quickly as they had come; and, when they had disappeared, the ranch house was burning and Miss Moxie and the Ranch King had disappeared with them.

They stampeded and drove away a dozen ponies that had been bunched near the corral, it being their intention to capture and mount these as soon as possible.

On one of these ponies Moxie was placed, with the Ranch King on another, and then the Apaches pushed on five or six miles, where they went into camp.

Apache Jim constituted himself the guard of the prisoners, and sat near them, revolver in hand.

Both Moxie and the Ranch King were crushed by the situation. The Ranch King did not believe Apache Jim could protect them from the madmen who were howling and dancing in the firelight but a few yards away.

"There's one thing," he said, speaking to Moxie, and it seemed to give him comfort, "if they stay here and keep that up till morning, they'll be pursued and attacked by a party from the ranch!"

"Unless—" and Moxie gave a great gasp, "Orrin and Huldah air dead! I'm afraid they air. And you couldn't depend on them cowboys, not one minute—nor on Arthur!"

"No," admitted the old man. "There's not much hope!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

ORGANIZING A PURSUIT.

The distress of Huldah was something terrible to witness. If her adopted father was not killed, he was worse than killed, and that Moxie should be carried away by these fiends in human form was too horrible to contemplate.

Orrin Jude was as bitter as death against the Apaches. He regarded them as no better than rattlesnakes. The idea was also in his mind that Apache Jim was at the bottom of this affair.

Before the coming of Snowflake Sam, Arthur Benson had made his appearance, professing great distress and bewailing the terrible loss and the cruelty that had inspired such a blow.

There were some cowboys who now gathered about him, coming from no one seemed to know where; for they had been invisible at the time of the raid.

Shortly afterward three or four more cowboys appeared, drawn by the fire, and coming from another direction.

These latter Orrin Jude knew; and knew, moreover, they could be relied on. They were from the "Double Bar," a ranch lying to the eastward, and when he saw them Orrin Jude could have shouted for very joy.

Arthur Benson was bitterly disappointed because he could not find the body of the Ranch King.

His arrangement with Apache Jim had been for the killing of the ranchman, and it now began to look as if the half-breed had played him false.

No one talked of anything but pursuit. Benson and Moxie must be rescued, every one asserted, and Orrin Jude pushed the preparations as rapidly as he could.

Snowflake Sam threw himself into the work with a will.

"Don't you think we'd better give you an escort and send you to Flagstaff?" he questioned of Huldah.

"There are no men to be spared, in the first place; and, in the second, I would not go if there were! I'm going with you and Orrin!"

"Not into Apache land?"

"Into Apache land, if the trail leads there!"

He saw she was not to be dissuaded. She had spoken the truth. There were but six men who could be relied on—four besides himself and Orrin. Not one of these could be spared.

As soon as ponies could be got ready, Orrin Jude picked up the trail of the fleeing redskins and guided the little party.

As the start was about to be made, Snowflake Sam caught Arthur a few feet away from his men and hissed some plain words into his ears:

"I see that you're going along! I know it's for purposes of treachery. There can be nothing between us but war, first, last and all the time; and I give you warning now, that at the very first sign of crookedness, I'll shoot you like I would a wolf! This is going to be a dangerous trail, and I'll stand no nonsense!"

"You may take as good as you send. If I see that you're not carrying yourself just right, I'll treat you as you've threatened to treat me! I'm not scaring worth a cent, though you may think I am!"

The cowboys who had last arrived brought rumors of soldiers, who were said to be in the vicinity on the lookout for raiders, and it was thought these might be drawn to the ranch by the light.

For, though the fire had been extinguished and the house saved, it had flamed up for a sufficient length of time to be widely observed.

"They can tell by our trail what has happened!" said Orrin. "No use to think o' waitin' fer 'em. Everybody ready? Then hyer we go!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TREACHERY.

Before Orrin Jude's order could be carried into effect, a horseman appeared out of the darkness with a startling story.

He claimed he had been fired on that evening by a small war party that had chased him until within a short distance of Benson's, when he had been able to give them the slip in the darkness. The pursuers had been mounted.

He expressed great indignation, and was horrified by the story of the raid on the ranch.

"I'm with you to follow the red devils to the death!" he cried. "Bill Blinkins has good cause to hate 'em. Ten years ago, down in the Mogeyone (Mogollon) country they burnt me out and killed my wife and baby, and I've had a debt to pay 'em ever since!"

Though he expressed himself so blood-thirstily, Orrin Jude and Snowflake Sam felt that the man was not to be trusted—in truth, they half believed him to be none other than Tiger Dan in disguise.

"I'll take a tug at that beard first chance!" Snowflake whispered to Orrin. "Then we'll see what we'll see!"

The stranger fraternized immediately with the cowboys, talking all the while of the great hate he bore all Apaches, and thus the pursuit began.

Following the trail was rather slow work, for much care was required because of the darkness, and daylight came before the point was gained where the Apaches had camped and caroused.

There were evidences plentifully scattered around to show the orgies they had indulged in, and Snowflake and Orrin looked everywhere with sinking hearts, fearing to find the mutilated remains of the Ranch King and Moxie. The Apaches do not scalp their slain enemies, but mutilate the bodies in a horrible manner!

The examination made it clear, though, that the prisoners had been taken on alive, and the pursuit was renewed with increasing hope and persistent vigor.

But the day passed, without an Indian being sighted; and, though they followed the trail far into the ensuing night, the Apaches were not overtaken, and the party was forced to camp.

The hour was late when the camp was made and the guard set. A hasty supper was got, and then all stretched on the grass, or among the rocks, to get a few winks of sleep.

The long, hard riding had told severely on Huldah. But for the fact that she had been accustomed to severe horseback exercise from childhood, she could not have stood it at all. But her pluck never failed. The desire to overtake the miscreants who held the prisoners had been so great that she had not permitted the column to halt for a moment on her account.

Snowflake Sam was too deeply impressed with the perils of their situation to fall asleep, though he lay down beside a boulder and seemed to slumber.

Thus an hour passed. No sounds came but those made by the feeding of the ponies; the guard, barely visible in the gloom, seemed only a rock.

Lying thus, Snowflake Sam fancied he heard a light footstep near him; and, turning quickly over, he looked up into the muzzle of a pistol.

The pistol was held in the hand of the man who had called himself Bill Blinkins.

Without a word, Snowflake Sam flounced out of the shadow of the rock and tried to leap up and close with the fellow.

As he did so the pistol was discharged and the ball tore through his coat. Then he was on his feet, struggling with the man and trying to wrest from him the weapon.

He heard excited outcries and shouts and a call from Orrin, and he knew in that moment that the guard in whom they had trusted had proven false.

This guard was one of the cowboys from the Double Bar ranch, whom Orrin had believed trusty.

Knowing that he was struggling for his life and for the safety of those dear to him, Snowflake Sam fought with the fury of a demon.

He held the revolver-hand of his enemy with one hand and began to choke him with the other.

Then the revolver dropped to the ground, the hand was wrenched away, and the man came at him again.

The false beard fell off, revealing the features of Tiger Dan.

"I thought it was you, you villain! I'll kill you for this!"

Tiger Dan was really a larger and stronger man than Snowflake, but he was not so lithe, and his greater years told against him.

He closed with Snowflake and tried to crush him to his chest in a bear-like hug, but Snowflake avoided this danger and struck him in the face.

Stooping down as if to avoid a blow, Snowflake seized Tiger Dan about the legs, and, lifting with all his strength, raised him bodily from the ground and hurled him over backward.

But before he could take advantage of this opportunity he was struck a blow on the head from behind, which brought him to his knees.

There seemed to be fighting all over the camp. Orrin had his hands full in a combat with a Mexican cowboy, who was trying to use on him a knife.

Suddenly a call sounded, which seemed to be a signal, for the Mexican tore away from Orrin, and Tiger Dan, picking himself up from where he had been tossed by Snowflake Sam, disappeared.

Snowflake's senses were reeling from the effect of the blow received, and for a time he could not rise.

When he returned to full consciousness he saw Orrin Jude and the faithful cowboys gathered about Huldah, while Orrin was calling to him:

"Jump over hyer behind this rock, lively!"

Snowflake Sam lost no time in obeying.

He was treated to a surprise. Arthur Benson was lying behind the big rock, bound hand and foot.

"They'll be on us agin mighty soon, I'm thinkin'! That was a false alarm, and they'll soon find it out! 'Twas me that sung out that call!"

"What do you mean?"

"Orrin learned, some time ago, the cry of the outlaws when they call a retreat, and he used it! If he hadn't, likely none of us would be living!"

"It's my opinion," and Orrin spurned the form of Arthur with his foot, "that the scamps thought that call come from this hyer chap, the way they jumped to obey it!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RINGED IN BY FOES.

Orrin was right in his opinion. When Tiger Dan and his followers heard that cry they thought it had come from Arthur Benson.

They discovered their mistake when too late to correct it, and now, essaying to retrace their steps, they were warned away by the stern voice of Orrin, while a bullet was sent singing over their heads.

"Was it one of you fools give that order, thinkin' Patchies was on us?" Tiger Dan angrily demanded.

All denied the charge.

Tiger Dan did not intend these foes to escape, and he was especially anxious to serve and save his friend, who had so unfortunately been captured.

This capture of Arthur had been effected by one of the cowboys from the Double Bar, who, seeing him sneak toward Huldah, had promptly downed him with a boulder hurled against the side of his head.

Tiger Dan's men, seeing they could only get pistol and rifle balls by making a dash now, and that they might shoot Arthur, determined to ring the retreat in and await the coming of daylight.

Behind the big rock, where our friends crouched in suspense, Arthur began to rave and demand that he be released.

"Whoever says I intended anything but to serve Miss Huldah lies from the depths of his black heart. I ask her not

to let me be treated in this way. My intentions toward her were honorable. I wanted to protect her!"

Orrin Jude and Snowflake Sam were not so ready to hearken to his terrified falsehoods.

"That's all right! 'We ain't goin' to hurt ye jist now, and you'll be quite comfortable with them ropes on. If they git to hurtin' too bad we can change 'em, but we're in no hurry to take 'em off!'"

"You have no cause to think me not in earnest in this chase!"—Orrin had blurted out the general belief that Arthur was hypocritical in pretending he wanted to rescue the Ranch King—"and you've done me rank injustice from the start. Now, as a matter of right, I demand that these ropes be taken off!"

"Heave ahead with your demandin'! Demands is cheaper'n blackberries; but they's nobody goin' to bu'st hisself hurryin' to obey!"

The angry contention was cut short by a shower of balls that came whistling about their heads from the rifles of the outlaws, who had ensconced themselves in as good a position as they could secure.

Snowflake Sam and one of the cowboys replied to the shots; then all grew still.

The outlaws lay out on the slopes like wolves, awaiting the coming of day, not daring to make a dash in the darkness, and the little party thus hemmed in passed a most uneasy night.

When the sun rose it looked down on a strange scene.

Six white men and one white woman crouched in a stony depression on the top of a rise; and, surrounding them on all sides, but lower down, lay a dozen outlaws.

The location, for defensive purposes, could not have been better chosen; though, until the sun showed its advantages, neither its occupants nor their foes knew how strong the position was.

To take the place, Tiger Dan's men would have to charge up an incline, with the certainty that half their number or more would fall before the crest was reached.

But there was one enemy that the defenders of the hill could not fight, and that was thirst. Though they had food, they had not a drop of water.

Their ponies had been treacherously run off at the moment of the attack, and were now in the hands of Tiger Dan's men.

As the sun mounted higher and higher, their condition became almost desperate. The sun blazed like a furnace, the rocks glowed with heat, and there was nothing to afford them shelter. It was far worse than that which Snowflake and Huldah and Mad Charley had endured when surrounded by the Apaches.

The outlaws wasted very little ammunition. They fired now and then to show that they were still there and watching. Occasionally a shot was answered from the hill, but no damage seemed to be done.

Orrin began a hopeful study of the position of the ponies. They occupied a grassy hollow, beyond the foot of the hill, which was screened about by lava rocks, and he came to the conclusion that they were not closely guarded. Two or three times he had seen some of them stray out toward the end of the valley, but the grass always drew them back; and he was satisfied the outlaws were relying on the grass to keep them in the valley.

There was a depression running from the crest of the hill out toward the ponies, and in the earlier part of the day Orrin and his friends had feared the outlaws might try to creep up this depression and take the place.

To attempt to descend by means of it seemed almost like walking into the fire, but the more Orrin studied the situation the more determined he grew to capture the ponies.

When he communicated his views to

his friends they were strenuously opposed to the undertaking.

But, undeterred, he crept like a lizard through a rift in the rocks into the channel-like depression, and then crawled along on his face, hardly moving a yard a minute.

His friends almost held their breath, so great was their fear that some outlaw might see him and shoot him.

Whenever a dangerous point was reached Orrin seemed hardly to move at all; yet he made constant progress, and in less than a half hour he was at the bottom of the hill and not fifty yards from the ponies—and still he had not been seen.

From the point now gained he saw that the ponies were wholly unguarded.

Crawling along within less than fifty paces of one of Tiger Dan's men, who sat with rifle across his knees, looking at the slope, Orrin emerged finally into the valley itself, and there, sheltered from view by the rocks, rose to his feet.

He was cramped and sore from his long crawl, but the light of victory shone in his eyes.

He knew almost every pony by name and had ridden all of them.

To his great delight he found that the lariats, together with the saddles and bridles, had been deposited close at hand, near the head of the grass valley.

He did not risk putting saddles on any of the ponies, however, with one exception; that exception was Huldah's pony, on whose back he placed her side-saddle.

Pulling on the lariat of the one he had chosen as leader, he drew it to the opening that led out of the valley, where he mounted to its bare back, and called softly and lovingly to the others.

They responded, trotting after him with loud whinnies, which he knew must reach the ears of the outlaws.

Breaking boldly from the enclosure, he set the lead pony into a quick, swinging gallop, which was increased as the foot of the hill was gained; and then, with all of them racing wildly after him, he rode out into the open country, as if with the intention of taking the ponies away from the vicinity.

The outlaws saw what had happened. Though they were immensely surprised and somewhat lost their heads, they began to shoot in a way that speedily told.

Two of the ponies went down, and four were frightened into wheeling about and darting in another direction.

Orrin's voice arose above the firing and the whistling of the balls, still calling to the ponies, and the others came after him still.

The outlaws speedily captured the ponies that ran back, and soon four of them were mounted and in hot pursuit of the daring cowboy.

Orrin led them a spirited chase, veering his course imperceptibly at first, but surely back in the direction of his friends on the crest of the hill, who were watching his movements with painful interest.

The outlaws, bewildered by what he had done, almost forgot the people on the crest, and in less than twenty minutes only four men remained in position to hold the prisoners within the hollow.

The time had come for Snowflake and the others to act.

Quickly instructing his followers, he leaped out of the hollow and charged the outlaws, who still stood at their posts.

These were close together near the foot of the slope, and all on the northern side, the side opposite to that descended by Orrin.

They fell back before this charge, and one was badly wounded by a bullet from the rifle of a cowboy.

Huldah had armed herself, and hurried along at the side of Snowflake Sam, anxious to be near him and to die by his side if he fell.

While the outlaws were thus separated and bewildered, Orrin Jude rounded the

hill and came tearing back in the direction of its crest. He had not half the ponies he had left the hollow with, but he still had enough for a mount, and he began to feel that in his daring and brilliant manoeuvre he had won.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. A LOVE-LORN CHIEF.

Miss Moxie squealed out in fright. The ogling, leering eyes of an old Indian had appeared in sight.

She had been for a day or more a prisoner of the Apaches, protected thus far from harm by the influence of Apache Jim.

She was in a skin lodge at the time, and for an hour had been undisturbed, so that the sudden appearance of the old Indian had uncommonly startled her.

The Apaches were in one of their camping places or temporary villages.

The young men, who had made the raid under the lead of the half-breed, had hurried to this spot, believing it the safest they could occupy; and believing, also, that they had cunningly hidden their trail and baffled pursuit.

Among these Indians Apache Jim had been born, and among them he had lived until he had gone out in the world to become a cowboy; and his return had been hailed with pleasure by his mother and by this old chief, who was his uncle.

Moxie from the very first had feared this chief, for the ancient warrior had not been long in making her understand that he was enamored of her charms and desired her to become his squaw.

The fact that he already had a wife was not taken into account, nor did he seem to think it necessary that Moxie should show some regard for him in order to make the match acceptable.

So far, however, he had done nothing but ogle her whenever she appeared, though this had been sufficient to frighten her half to death.

On her arrival in the village, Moxie had attracted a great deal of attention from the women. Many of them had never before seen a white squaw, and their looks showed that they did not regard her kindly; and Moxie knew enough of Indian character to understand that any of them would be only too glad to stick a knife into her at the first opportunity.

Moxie's position, therefore, was far from pleasant—it was, in fact, filled with peril of the gravest kind.

But, if her position was perilous, so, also, was the Ranch King's.

For hours after their first arrival, Apache Jim had been forced to stand near the Ranch King with loaded revolver to keep the angry women from rushing on him and tearing his eyes out.

When Moxie squealed out, at the appearance of the old chief, the latter halted in the tent door, screwed his face into what he thought a most fetching expression, and gave her a longing leer.

"You miserable old wretch, I've a notion to jab your eyes out with this stick."

"How?"

"I'll show ye, you old wretch! Git out o' hyer!"

Her anger overleaped its bounds, and, being also urged on by her fears, she threw the stick at his head.

If she had aimed at his eyes, her blow could not have fallen truer. The sharp end of the stick struck in one and brought the blood.

The old man clapped his hands to his face with a howl.

Moxie stared aghast at what she had done, but only for an instant; then she leaped back, with a scream.

Loo-loo, the old chief, drew a knife from his shirt, where it had been suspended by a thong about his neck, and rushed on with a mad howl.

Another scream came from Moxie's lips.

Then the door of the tepee was darkened and the Ranch King dashed in.

He was just in time to keep Loo-loo from knifing Moxie.

With a bound, Benson reached the Indian's side; and, catching him by the hair, threw him violently backward. The knife slipped from Loo-loo's grasp and flew, spinning, to the other side of the tent.

So great was the Ranch King's anger that new strength seemed given him. No sooner was the Indian on his back than the Ranch King was on top of him, struggling to hold him down.

Miss Moxie's sudden release had sent her sprawling, but she was almost instantly on her feet, and, seeing the Ranch King's efforts, she rushed to his assistance.

She sat herself plump in the old Indian's face, and together they held him down. But they had nothing with which to bind him.

How the struggle would have ended cannot be told, for the tepee door was again darkened, and Apache Jim, drawn by the noise, came hurriedly in.

Although commanded to do so, the Ranch King refused to let the chief get up till Miss Moxie had explained what had taken place. When she did rise, they saw the old Indian gasping for breath, his face purple, and the life almost smothered out of him.

Apache Jim hurried the two prisoners out of the tepee and into the one that had been occupied by the Ranch King.

Then he returned to restore and pacify the discomfited wooer.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MAKING BIG MEDICINE.

Apache Jim found his wits tested severely. Loo-loo was mad enough to slaughter anything and everything that came in his way, and nothing but the strongest kind of argument, half backed by threats, sobered the old man down.

Fortunately, no news of what had occurred had got beyond the tepee door, and the village was soon thrilled by the sight of signal smoke on the mountains, and made temporarily forgetful of the prisoners.

The watchfires on the mountains, which increased in numbers, notified them that blue coats were in the field and coming that way; and also told that other Apache bands were hastening to this place as a rendezvous.

The excitement waxed intense, and while the fires and the columns of smoke were studied and interpreted, men were sent to the tops of near-by peaks to light similar fires and so answer the signals.

All this was very fortunate for the prisoners. Loo-loo had his thoughts turned into other channels, and they for the present escaped his fury.

That afternoon a band of Apaches came, and others before nightfall.

Along with them came a big chief, whose purpose seemed to be to consult the fates by making big medicine and having a medicine dance.

He had with him, of course, a medicine man, or conjurer, who, on special occasions, was more influential and powerful than any chief or fighter of the tribe.

Benson was made very uneasy by the gathering together of so many Apaches. The coming of powerful chiefs or warriors would probably rob Apache Jim of what little authority he claimed, and the death of the prisoners, by torture, perhaps, might be the result.

As night came on, Apache Jim slipped into the tepee.

"Come!" he whispered. "Must git way from this. Bad Injun make trouble, mebbe."

"What are you up to, Jim?"

"Ranch King help Jim bimeby, mebbe. Pay Jim money bimeby!"

The secret was out—partly at least. Apache Jim expected pay for his services.

"You shall be paid big. Help us, now, Jim, and I'll see that you don't lose anything by it!"

Apache Jim beckoned toward the other side of the village.

There a rocky surface rose straight up from the little valley, being the flat side

of a hill or high mesa, and when they were out of the tent and slipping along at his heels he led them toward that point.

As they neared the place, Apache Jim stopped, with a gesture of silence.

Looking through the gloom, Moxie saw an Indian woman standing near the cliff wall, staring at the proceedings taking place in the hollow just below her. A baby in a basket cradle swung at her back, and sucking its fat fist in baby fashion. The firelight, burning only a few paces away, rendered her fairly visible, when the flames leaped up.

"Stay herc!" whispered the half-breed, and then he wriggled off through the darkness, leaving the prisoners crouching near the cliff wall, hidden from the view of the Indians by a mass of giant cacti that rose beside them.

A pole had been erected in the hollow, around which a number of almost naked redskins were leaping and bowing in the jerky Indian fashion.

On the top of the pole was an object, toward which they directed their hate, and which seemed to represent the despised white men whom they were intending to drive out of the country.

Then a wild Indian song, sounding more like the yelping of coyotes than notes from human throats, was commenced:

"Ha, yah! ha, yah! Hock-e-a-yum! Hock-e-a-yum! Ha, yo, yum yo! Hock-e-a-yum! Hock-e-a-yum! Ow yo, how yo. Hock-e-a-yum! Hock-e-a-yum! Wah haw, haw wah. Hock-e-a-yum! Hock-e-a-yum! Wo ho, ho wo. Hock-e-a-yum! Hock-e-a-yum!"

There seemed to be no meaning to the words, if words they were, but the wild melody and the thumping of keg-shaped drums filled the hearts of the Apaches with the liveliest kind of hate, and caused their coyote yells to shrill across the hills in a way to scare even the shadows.

Moxie listened with dread and fear, and the emotions of the Ranch King were much of the same order. These Apaches were now little better than human devils, capable of any deed.

Instinctively the Ranch King picked up a stone and held it as a weapon.

The dance finally ended, and the medicine man arose, gorgeous in paint and feathers, and waved in a circle around his head the skin of a hydrophobia cat—a species of western weasel, whose bite, it is said, will produce hydrophobia.

The skin had been stuffed to represent the living animal, and big beads glittered where the eyes should have been.

The crowd about the medicine man crept closer to him, though their awe was clearly observable, while he lifted his voice in a wild wail that seemed a song of lament for a lost soul.

Moxie, whose interest in the strange scene had been growing, in spite of the fear she felt, bent forward in an endeavor to see more perfectly.

Unfortunately, she was on the slope of a hill, or incline, that dipped downward toward the Apaches and the conjurer; and, also, most unfortunately, she stepped on a boulder, that turned under her foot.

Before she knew what had happened, she found herself shooting down the incline straight at the medicine man.

She uttered a little cry and tried to stop her descent, digging her fingers into the soil in a way to draw after her a shower of small boulders.

An outcry arose, and then, with a plump, losing all hold, she dropped into the midst of the throng and knocked the medicine man from his feet.

The stuffed skin of the hydrophobia cat dropped from the hands of the astonished conjurer and fell in her face.

It was as if a rattlesnake had touched her.

She seized the thing, with a screech, and threw it from her.

Another outcry arose, for the stuffed skin, which was the conjurer's medicine bag, flew into the fire.

At the risk of burned fingers, an Apache dived into the flames and rescued it, though not before it had been singed.

The Ranch King beheld all this in bewilderment and terror. It had occurred with such startling rapidity that it was all over before he could really give a thought to its effect.

Now he saw Moxie leaped on by ferocious warriors with brandished knives, and fully expected to see her killed.

But there were two to interpose in Moxie's behalf—Apache Jim and Loo-loo, the chief. Apache Jim because he thought it would bring him money to save her, and Loo-loo because his heart was still set on making her his wife.

Loo-loo interposed his bulky form between the woman and the infuriated and shocked friends of the medicine man, and when they began to clamor at his act he drew his knife.

"Squaw for Loo-loo!"

Without more ado he dragged her from the spot, holding the threateners back with the flourishing knife, and, being joined by Apache Jim, they got her out of the crowd.

Apache Jim took an arm and Loo-loo another, and between them they fairly carried Moxie up the slope to where the Ranch King was standing, a bewildered spectator.

"In this!" said Apache Jim.

He pointed to a black hole in the face of the cliff above their heads.

Apparently there was no way of reaching it; but Apache Jim indicated some niches cut in the face of the rock, intended to be used for climbing.

Dragging and tugging at the woman, Apache and Loo-loo lifted her up the face of the cliff, the Ranch King scrambling blindly and nervously after them.

The medicine man could be heard haranguing the people in the hollow, and the Ranch King knew he was bitterly mortified and angry.

Some Indians rushed up the slope and stood at the foot of the cliff, gesticulating up at the hole into which the prisoners had been placed, and demanding that they be brought down.

Loo-loo and the half-breed were climbing down, and began to parley as if arguing the case.

Benson heard Apache Jim say it was not meet that the squaw of the great Loo-loo should be killed for an error; that a slip of the foot was responsible for the accident to the medicine man, and that the medicine man should have the fine Winchester rifle the half-breed had brought in to pay him for his humiliation.

"You shall have a dozen Winchesters fer that, Jim!" Benson muttered.

But he did not interpret to Moxie what he had heard.

"Oh, dear! Do you think we'll be killed?" she gasped.

"From what's already happened, I'm counting big that Apache Jim will be equal to whatever comes up. He's got more sense and shrewdness than I ever thought. I'll see that he don't lose anything by his present course!"

The Ranch King was forgetful of the fact that but for Apache Jim he and Moxie would not be in their present perilous position.

CHAPTER XL.

A BATTLE FOR LIFE.

However, the humiliation of the medicine man was too great for him to let the matter rest. He had been disgraced before all the people—disgraced in a way that only blood could wipe out.

Only the prompt intervention of Loo-loo and Apache Jim had kept him from leaping on Moxie and driving a knife to her heart. And nothing but a knowledge that it was not the part of a wise conjurer to display human anger and hate made him withhold his efforts to bring about her death even after she had been lifted to the hole in the cliff.

But because he lapsed into silence and again turned to incantations was no sign that he was forgetful.

From his high position the Ranch

King saw the recommencement of the medicine dance and heard the howls and songs of the fierce warriors; and, with his uneasiness growing, he sought to discover a way out of the place.

But their prison was only a hole in the side of the cliff, ten feet in diameter, without opening save the one they had come through.

Picking up a boulder, he sounded the walls. They had a queer, hollow ring, that made him fancy that maybe there was another cavern or chamber back of this first one. But the discovery, if such it was, did not aid them.

The dance ended; the Apaches disappeared, some into their lodges, others sinking to slumber on the ground where they dropped.

Moxie, literally worn out, was already fitfully sleeping, waking and starting up from time to time with frightened cries.

Soon afterward the Ranch King, in spite of his fears, fell also into a somnolent state.

Out of it he was aroused by a light footfall; and, springing up, he beheld the face of the medicine man, writhing with hate and fury.

The medicine man carried a slender knife, and there could be no doubt of his purpose.

Hearing Benson's exclamation, he shot out a muscular hand and sought to catch him by the throat.

But Benson avoided this, and, scrambling to his feet, threw his arms around the medicine man's waist.

The conjurer was almost naked, and his body slippery with some oily preparation.

His knife swiftly descended.

But the Ranch King knocked the knife hand aside, and the blade caught against the wall and did no damage.

Then the two came together, like charging buffaloes; the knife dropped from the Indian's hands, and the battle became one of strength and dexterity.

For a while it seemed that the medicine man would be able to lift the ranchman bodily from his feet and hurl him out of the niche, but Benson, who had been an athlete of the plains in his earlier days, had not lost all his knowledge and cunning, and the fight proved not so unequal as might have been expected.

Neither spoke a word as they whirled round and round the small enclosure.

Strangely enough, Moxie continued to sleep, though her dreams must have been frightful, judging by the manner in which her limbs and body jerked.

The foot of the medicine man touched her, and she awoke with a low cry.

She was dazed and horror-struck by what she saw.

But this lasted for only a moment. Then she understood clearly; and, noting the knife on the floor, she dashed to it and sought to pick it up.

The medicine man observed her movements and tried to prevent her, sure that if she got the knife in her hands she would sink it in his back.

The intervention was fatal to his hopes. It enabled the Ranch King to shift his hold for a better, and the next moment medicine man and ranchman came to the floor with a shock that fairly knocked the breath out of both.

Benson was the first to recover. Then he saw Moxie sitting on the medicine man's face, as she had sat on the face of Loo-loo, and he sprang to her aid.

They had nothing, though, with which to tie the medicine man.

Moxie tore a breadth off her skirt and twisted it into cords. The medicine man was struggling back into consciousness, but before he recovered he was bound hand and foot, and helpless.

However, the struggle had not passed without coming to the knowledge of others.

Some exclamations and questions came up from the lodges, and to these, in spite of the danger, the medicine man shouted back replies.

An Apache tried to climb up the cliff,

and Moxie, her heroic fibre aroused, hurled down a small boulder, which struck him on the head and tumbled him to the ground.

It was a declaration of war that was instantly accepted.

Shots and cries answered, the shots pattering against the roof of the little cavern. But, fired from below, they did no damage.

The medicine man called out to them again, and two other Indians dashed to the foot of the cliff and sought to scale it.

But Moxie was again at her post, and tumbled down boulders in a way to cause them to beat an ignominious retreat.

As she did this, rifles were fired at her. "We'll stop that!"

The Ranch King, with Moxie's assistance, rolled the medicine man to the entrance, thus interposing his body as a barrier against the rifle shots.

He would have been killed by his friends below, but that he called out to them, explaining his position and danger.

The firing stopped.

The Ranch King was nervous. They could not hope to hold the place against the combined strength and cunning of the village. And to be taken now meant death.

He picked up the knife of the medicine man and with it sounded the walls.

Moxie stood, boulder in hand, ready to crush the first Indian head that appeared.

A great hubbub went on below, and from time to time shots came in that direction, but the fear of killing the medicine man kept the Indians from firing into the hole.

Benson, finding a spot that sounded suggestively hollow, attacked it with the knife-blade.

The wall was of a chalky material, into which the point of the knife could be driven, and he worked feverishly to gouge out a hole that should open communication with the cavern behind, if such a cavern existed.

A cry arose from him as the knife broke through the partition.

Five minutes later the hole was large enough to admit his body.

He thrust an arm through, but could touch nothing, and drew back.

The medicine man screamed out something to the Apaches.

"We've got to stop that!" Benson averred. "Can you spare another piece?—here's a handkerchief that'll answer just as well!"

He whipped it out and gagged the medicine man so that he could not utter a sound.

"Now, come!" he commanded. "We'll be killed sooner or later here. Let's make a try of it while we can."

He dropped through the opening, with a great show of confidence, and then helped Moxie.

The ledge to which they had stepped led downward at a steep angle, and they descended, slipping and sliding, not knowing what was before them.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE GOLDEN GORGE.

Slipping and sliding, down they went into the impenetrable darkness, driven on by the cries of the Apaches, which they could still hear. There was nothing to do but go on, even though the next step might hurl them to death over some precipice.

Displaced boulders leaped by them or rattled in their wake, and every instant they expected to hear a yell announcing the medicine man's release, which would mean a sharp and quick pursuit.

But they went on and on, until a wall interposed. Finding a niche, they crouched in it for what seemed hours, wondering why they were not pursued.

Then a spot began to gleam like a star. The Ranch King hailed it with delight.

"We may get out of this yet. That's a bit of daylight, coming in through some hole!"

Toward the hole they carefully made their way, buoyed by a wild excitement.

Cries of delight came to their lips when the hole was approached, for they saw it was large enough to give them exit, and that it opened into a bouldered valley that seemed to contain no Indians.

With trembling and thankfulness they climbed through it, out of the horrible darkness of the cave. Then they found themselves in a little valley, ringed in hills that were apparently impassable. Not a living thing was in sight.

Just across the valley rose a mound that seemed to be the remains of some sort of building.

But the Ranch King did not stop to examine it. He sought a hill farther on, which he thought he and Moxie might defend against the Apaches.

They mounted to the crest of this hill, which was something of a natural fortification, and there, in shivering dread, awaited the coming of their implacable foes.

More than an hour went by.

The long silence gave courage to the ranchman, and he walked, with Moxie, to the other mound, which they proceeded to scan.

The ranchman stooped down with an exclamation; and when he rose he exhibited to Moxie a peculiar spearhead.

"Look at it! It's gold!"

Excitedly they searched the mound, finding some other gold spearheads; and then, in a rocky angle, where the articles had evidently been carefully stored, they came on a lot of gold ornaments, with chunks of solid gold, and a cupful of emeralds.

The wily Apaches were almost forgotten in this wonderful find.

When no more could be discovered, the ranchman began to chip at the rock with his knife. *The very stones with which the old building had been erected were threaded and lined with gold!* And an examination of the ledge at the back of the mound showed a similar state of things.

The structure had been a temple, probably, of some ancient Indian city.

The experience of the Ranch King told him that here was treasure enough to purchase food for an army. But, alas! there was no food to purchase!—and both he and Moxie were growing fairly wild with hunger.

The tortures of hunger and thirst became overpowering as soon as the excitements attending their escape and the gold discovery had worn off.

But there was nothing to eat in the little valley, and not a drop of water.

Leaving the gold where they had found it, they went back to the hill chosen as a place of refuge, and waited long hours for the coming of the Apaches.

When the Apaches did not come, the Ranch King determined to know the reason.

In the very nature of things, he argued, there would be a pursuit if nothing occurred to prevent.

Leaving Moxie on the crest, Benson crept through the hole into the galleried cavern and ascended the slippery way to the point from which the Apache village could be seen. He reached it after much climbing.

He was bewildered by his discovery. The village was deserted. Most of the lodges were gone. Not a living thing was in sight.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ORRIN SHOWS HIS NERVE.

Half buried in sand and with a bit of sage brush twisted about his head, Orrin Jude lay flat on the mesa, above the Indian village, and looked down into the very faces of the warriors as night approached.

It was a position of such extreme peril that none but the bravest or the most reckless would have thought of assuming it.

Orrin had reached his point of vantage in the night, guided partly by sound and partly by sight. He had heard the yells and dancing songs, the barbaric

thump of the drums, and had beheld the gleam of the firelight.

This was on the night preceding the day that brought such danger and distress to the Ranch King and Moxie.

But his discoveries had justified the risks. He had seen the Ranch King and Miss Moxie.

A gray blanket, that resembled in color the gray of the sunburnt rocks, had enabled him to slip from point to point and reach the mesa's rim.

As the dusk thickened, Jude crawled out of his dangerous position, though only a knowledge that it was wiser to seek first the band under Snowflake Sam made him willing to leave the vicinity of the valley where Moxie was held.

Ten miles away, with a patience as rare as his own, Snowflake Sam and the cowboys had been waiting, with Huldah in their midst.

When last seen by the reader, these cowboys were threatened by Tiger Dan and certain of his followers, and Orrin Jude was bringing in the ponies he had so daringly recaptured.

By means of these ponies and some brisk fighting Snowflake's men had broken through the cordon of outlaws and had ridden away, with the loss of only one man, holding the false Arthur Benson as a prisoner.

But the next night Arthur had worked out of his bonds and escaped into the desert.

When Orrin came into the midst of the camp he was warmly greeted and immediately surrounded by his eager friends, to whose questions he replied with a recital of what he had seen and heard.

"A bit of strategy now will be worth a lot of fighting!"

With the words, Snowflake Sam took from a pocket of his coat a package of the phosphoric preparation he had so cleverly used on several previous occasions.

His plan was made known, and the cowboys assisted in turning him into a fiery spectre by applying the preparation liberally to his person and clothing. Then the hoofs of his horse were carefully muffled.

Snowflake Sam wrapped himself in a blanket and covered his face with a mask of cloth so that the phosphoric shine could not be seen prematurely; then the entire party rode toward the valley that held the Apache village, guided by Orrin Jude.

The approach to the village was made with great celerity.

Sitting their horses like shadows, the party looked down on the orgies of the Apaches, which had, however, been temporarily interrupted by the escape of the Ranch King and Moxie into the hole in the cliff.

The medicine man, though, was again deep in his incantations, and a crowd was gathered about him.

Snowflake Sam detached himself from his companions, rode softly to the head of the valley, and there, casting aside the blanket and the mask, he swept down on the village.

The confusion that followed is indescribable.

The valorous medicine man was one of the first to take to his heels, and within ten minutes the Apaches were scattered over the hills and the mesa, racing away as if for dear life.

The cowboys rode after the fleeing savages, thinking to corral and capture some of them, and resolved, at all events, to rescue the prisoners.

But the wily Apaches slipped away through clefts and gorges into impenetrable fastnesses of the hills, and the despairing pursuers finally drew rein, very much cast down because they had not seen or heard anything of the ranchman and Moxie.

Orrin was fairly wild with disappointment and fear. The horrible thought that perhaps Moxie lay dead somewhere along those black slopes, murdered, rendered him almost frantic.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ARTHUR BENSON TAKES A SHOT AT THE SHINER.

Snowflake Sam rode back from the pursuit as dejected as any. They had scattered the Apaches, but the victory seemed barren of results. Like Orrin, he was oppressed by an awful dread. Where was his father, the Ranch King?

As he thus rode along, the shining phosphoric preparation rendering him visible in the darkness, his return was seen and marked by the false Arthur.

Arthur had had a hard time of it since his escape from the cowboys.

Weaponless, he had fled in the night out into the desert. He had hurried on and on, without much idea of direction, and in the morning had found himself in a waterless, arid waste.

Getting his bearings from a well-known mountain range, he had set out for a rendezvous which Tiger Dan had appointed in case an emergency should indicate its necessity.

Arthur feared there were not many chances of finding any of the Tiger band, but he trudged on, hugging hope to his heart.

Night was at hand before he reached the rendezvous, and he was in a half-starved condition.

None of the outlaws were there, but they had been there, as hoof-marks and the remains of a fire showed.

On looking about, he found a note, set in a stick in the sand, which told him where some food had been cached.

With the food was a bottle of water.

The trail of the outlaws showed they had gone toward the south, and he decided to go in the same direction.

But the need of sleep was so strong that he did not attempt to go further that night, and when morning came he found that a high wind which had prevailed during the night had obliterated the hoof prints.

However, he set out in a southerly direction, wandering on and on.

After nightfall the lights of the Apache village drew him.

He crept toward it, and witnessed the rush of the fiery spectre, the stampede of the village, and the occurrences immediately succeeding.

An Apache dropped near him, killed by a bullet from a cowboy's rifle, and, with a thrill of glee and hope, Arthur secured the Apache's rifle and cartridge belt.

Then he beheld the fiery spectre returning up the valley toward him.

He knew who the spectre was, and set his teeth hard, while a fierce joy swelled in his heart. He believed if he could secure the horse of Snowflake Sam he could get safely out of the country. He would avenge himself on his enemy and at the same time bring about his own salvation.

The idea took such possession of him that, as Snowflake cantered near, his hands shook till he could hardly hold the rifle.

"This will never do!" he muttered, endeavoring to quiet his nerves. "If this keeps up, I can't hit the side of a house!"

Though the eagle eyes of Snowflake Sam tried to scan every bit of space in front and on each side, the shadows into which Arthur had dropped kept him from being seen.

Looking ahead, Snowflake was about to strike spurs into his horse and increase his speed, for the village was still nearly a mile away, when a tongue of fire cut the darkness, and he fell from the saddle to the ground.

With a jerk, one foot caught in its stirrup, and it seemed for an instant that he would be dragged across the stones by the frightened horse; but the stirrup released its grip, the horse galloped on, and Snowflake Sam lay on the sand as if dead.

Arthur ran out toward the horse, calling loudly to it, and it stopped, with a whinny of recognition, and came toward him. It was one of the ranch horses, which he had frequently ridden.

Seizing the bridle rein, Arthur mounted quickly to the saddle.

He was on the point of riding back to the point where Snowflake Sam had fallen, when he fancied he heard footfalls, and, not knowing how great danger he might incur by remaining, he galloped back over the way Snowflake Sam had come, and so left the valley.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SHIELDED BY INDIAN SUPERSTITION.

Snowflake Sam was not dead, though he lay like one bereft of life. The bullet had furrowed the skin near the base of the brain and had rendered him as unconscious as if its blow had been a killing one.

The shot had been heard and his fall witnessed by some Apaches hiding in a near-by gorge.

They were of those who had fled from the village in wild dismay so short a time before, and they were still filled with superstitious fears. That the shining spirit form should be subject to death by a bullet struck them as queer, however; and, when they saw Arthur gallop away and observed that there were no white men in sight, they came out of the gorge and hurried to where Snowflake Sam lay.

Their awe so increased as they drew near him that they were more than once on the point of rushing back and abandoning the investigation which their curiosity prompted.

But they brought their courage to the sticking place and approached.

With guttural exclamations they examined Snowflake Sam's injury; and, discovering its comparatively trivial character, they lifted him and bore him into the gorge from which they had emerged.

There, shielded from the view of any one in the valley, they applied a plaster of beaten leaves and a bandage to his head and poured water into his face to revive him.

Then, concluding it was the part of wisdom to leave the vicinity, they worked their way further back into the gorge, and climbed, by goat-like paths, to the heights above.

When Snowflake Sam came back to consciousness, he found himself before a low-burning fire, surrounded by Apaches, who regarded him with the utmost curiosity, and even sympathy, if Apaches are possessed of such a quality.

Their exclamations and gestures told him he was regarded as more than an ordinary man, and he jumped to the proper conclusion—that he was supposed to be a being of another sphere, because of his shining appearance.

His wounded head was re-bandaged with cooling leaves. When he tried to rise, and found himself almost too weak to move, an Apache, with a grunt of disapproval, pushed him back.

Before day the Apaches moved on again, carrying with them Snowflake Sam, who was still quite weak, and who again lost consciousness.

When he recovered again, he found himself in a skin lodge, set up temporarily.

Darkness reigned—for the night had not passed—and he was alone.

Resolving to make the most of the belief of the Apaches, he felt in an inner pocket of his coat and found that the precious phosphorus package was still there.

He carefully got it out and applied a portion of it to his person and clothing, causing the phosphoric shine to glow with increased strength.

Hardly had he done this when an Apache came into the room and stopped with an exclamation of awe when he looked at Snowflake.

"I'll work the trick for all it's worth," Snowflake thought. "I wonder if these rascals haven't Miss Moxie and the Ranch King?"

CHAPTER XLV.

BACK INTO THE GOLDEN GORGE.

The Apaches beat a retreat, the lodge skin was again shaken, and the medicine man came in.

The way the old juggler gazed at Snow-

flake Sam showed that he looked on the white man, not as a spirit or a being divinely sent, but as a medicine man of superior skill.

There was in his manner, too, an indication of fear and awe, for he had a wholesome respect for the craft and knowledge of the whites.

The medicine man addressed Snowflake Sam in Apache and then in broken English; and what he said told Snowflake more and more of the high opinion in which he was held.

Snowflake made a cautious inquiry or two, and then lapsed into silence, deeming it wise to wait for further information before committing himself to anything.

Thereupon the medicine man lit a torch from a campfire just at hand and thrust it, in an upright position, in the ground.

The result caused him to leap up in surprise and peer at the white man, from whose person the phosphoric shine had suddenly, with the lighting of the torch, disappeared.

To make sure he had seen aright, the old fellow blew the torch out; and then, relighting it, blew it out again, thus convincing himself that the shine was only to be seen in the dark.

He disappeared shortly, taking the torch with him, and Snowflake Sam wondered what would happen next.

Nothing happened, except that a very comely Apache girl, just as day dawned, brought him in some poorly-cooked meat to eat.

A half hour later he was taken out of the lodge, the lodge was pulled down, and he saw that the Apaches were ready for another movement.

Their force had been much augmented during the night.

Snowflake Sam was a great curiosity, apparently, to all, and the fact that he did not shine in the daylight created much jabbering talk and the pointing toward him of many fingers.

An excitement that threatened to partake of stampeding qualities came when the first dark gorge was reached, and the entire band saw the "shiner" take on the gleam of the glow-worm, and saw it disappear again when the gorge was passed through.

"I'm all right as long as they don't find that phosphorus," was Snowflake's reflection. "But I do wish I knew where Moxie and father are! It's clear they're not with these fellows!"

Where were they?

Moxie and the Ranch King, poking their heads through the hole by which they had made their way into the golden valley, had discovered the abandoned condition of the Apache village, and were wondering thereat.

When positive there were no Apaches near, they climbed down the notched side of the cliff into the village; and, as they were in a famishing condition, began an immediate search for something to eat and drink.

As the village had been pitched at the side of a spring, they found no lack of water; and, fortunately, they came also on some jerked antelope meat that had been overlooked by some Apache in the hurry of removal.

When they had satisfied their hunger and thirst, they were so much encouraged that they began to entertain hopes of getting safely through their perils after all.

Moxie climbed to the top of a prominence and surveyed the surrounding country, and was so much frightened by the sight of some figures in the valley that she advised another retreat into the Golden Gorge.

The ranchman consented to this, and they climbed again to the hole in the wall, taking with them the remains of the antelope meat, though they found nothing in which they could convey any of the precious water.

Plunging into the darkness, they worked back toward the place they called the Golden Gorge, and were about

to emerge, when they heard voices; and, on looking out, saw that a dozen Apaches were camped near the opening.

These Apaches, as was learned later, had descended into the valley by means of ledgy paths and some notches in the cliff sides. Apparently this inconvenient means of descent had been the one used by the builders of the temple.

It was soon evident that the Apaches knew of the opening into the cave, for they entered it in a little while—the ranchman and Moxie retreating stealthily before them.

As they had not been seen by the Apaches, they hastened back toward the village, but, when they thought to descend again into it, they found that, during their absence, a small band of Apaches had returned.

They were thus placed between the devil and the deep sea, with Apaches behind them and Apaches before, and no weapons but some boulders and a knife.

The hole in the side of the cliff seemed the most perilous position of all to get caught in, and they accordingly crept again into the darkness.

They regretted now that, when they could have done so, they did not explore and familiarize themselves with the place.

But, examining it as they went along, they reached the correct conclusion that, in its nature, it was only a broad gallery, without other outlets than those of which they knew.

Turning an angle, they stopped aghast. The light of a fire reached them. The Apaches were cooking some jack rabbits shot that morning, and seemed inclined to make a stay in the place.

The ranchman and Moxie stepped quickly back; and, from the concealment of the gloom, watched earnestly what was going forward.

Benson began to realize more and more that, without the help of friends or soldiers, he and Moxie were not likely to get out of the country alive; for the region was swarming with these foes, and they had no weapons nor horses with which to cover the long distance.

But he whispered hopefully to Moxie: "We'll just wait till them rascals go away. I reckon it'll not be a great while!"

Hardly had he said it when a shout told him that the tracks he and Moxie had made had been discovered.

The whole band leaped up, and it was impossible to keep from Moxie the extreme gravity of the situation.

While Moxie and the ranchman retreated into the darkness, the Apaches prepared torches of greasewood; and, being by their aid able to pick up the trail with ease, crowded along and made the escape of the whites impossible.

Finding they could not hide in any of the niches the tunnel-like way afforded, Benson and Moxie crept frightenedly back toward the village.

As they emerged into the big hole or chamber in the side of the wall, an Apache, who had ascended to that point, tumbled back, with a yell, and dropped, rather than slid, to the ground.

A minute later a dozen Apaches were at the notches, climbing up; and Moxie, summoning her falling energy, began again to hurl boulders down on their heads.

As for Benson, he stationed himself, with the knife, at the hole he had gouged through the chalky rock, resolved that when worst came to worst he would make the Apaches pay dearly for a victory.

There came an interruption to an affair that could only have otherwise terminated in the death of our friends. A command to the Apaches in the village was shouted in the voice of Apache Jim, and the young bucks who were so frenziedly trying to climb up the notches, in spite of Moxie's boulders, brought their efforts to an end.

Apache Jim stood out in an open space and called up to the hole:

"That you, Mr. Benson? You let Jim come?"

Benson was glad enough to hear that voice; and he shouted back a consent, which brought Apache Jim scrambling up.

"Now, look here, Jim, I'm willing to surrender to you, on your promise that we're to have your protection. Otherwise, we'll stay here and be killed; and kill some of the dogs down there while they're killing us! Understand?"

The half-breed thought he understood, and glibly promised.

Again his white instincts were making him look beyond the excitement of the present to the time when the war should be at an end, the soldiers triumphant, and nothing of so much value as a few dollars.

"You pay Jim, eh? Me git killed, mebbe! Savvy? Pay me, when back to ranch!"

"I'll see that you don't lose anything!"

Even as they bargained, an Apache cry came from back of the hole, and Jim twisted about, with a start, to listen.

"There's a lot more of them in there! Unless you can beat some sense in their heads, Jim, I'll stand here and knife the first one that tries to come through!"

Apache Jim, who, in his excitement, had paid no attention to the hole up to that minute, now poked his head through it and shrilled something to those in the cave.

To this there came answering cries, and the sounds of feet, showing the Apaches understood him and were coming nearer.

Benson stood with the knife in his hand, ready to strike down even Apache Jim if he detected treachery.

But the money he was to get, and perhaps some kindly feeling for this man and woman, held the half-breed loyal.

After talking with the Apaches in the cave, he said there was only one way: the whites must become his prisoners, and to this, seeing that it offered the only hope, Benson and Moxie consented.

Then the Apaches in the village climbed up and joined those in the cave, and the united force, with the prisoners in their midst, moved down through the underground avenue to the Golden Gorge.

As they issued into the sunlight a shout burst from the Apaches' lips.

Another band was camped a half mile below, in close proximity to the hill where the whites had found and concealed the golden treasure.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A CLASH OF FORCES.

The distress of Orrin Jude and Huldah Benson was marked when they knew that among the missing, after the fight with the Apaches, was Snowflake Sam.

It was quite clear to Orrin that, dead or alive, Snowflake had been carried away; or that he had tumbled into some fissure, where his body could not be seen.

The notches in the cliff-side escaped the attention of the cowboys, or they might have ascended to the hole and penetrated to the Golden Gorge and have come thus on Moxie and the Ranch King. But long enough before it was day, the cowboys were far out on the high mesas, circling and circling, like Yuma trackers, to find the trails that eluded them.

There was another band out on those high mesas, lying in concealment in a mesquite grove, and that was the band of Tiger Dan.

Tiger Dan's men had been much alarmed by the movements of the Apaches, not desiring to come to close quarters with these relentless fighters.

At the moment of their reintroduction here, they were watching a small, dark object a mile or more away.

The object was plainly a man on horseback, coming in that direction. They believed, too, it was a white man, though they could not be sure.

Slowly the horseman approached till he came out into a more open section, and then he broke into a gallop and came on rapidly.

"Arthur Benson!" was the exclamation.

It was Arthur Benson, mounted on the horse taken from Snowflake Sam—Arthur Benson seeking safety by turning his head northward.

As he drew near the mesquite and would have passed, his name was shouted; and then Tiger Dan made himself known and arose to greet him.

Hardly was Tiger Dan on his feet, though, when another exclamation caught his attention.

"A dust-cloud!"

Arthur drew rein and stopped, and he and Tiger Dan looked together off to the southward.

"It's the cowboys, or some soldiers, following you!"

A shade of uneasiness came to both, and they discussed the significance of the discovery, as Tiger Dan walked by the side of the horse into the thick of the mesquite.

Arthur was glad to find these friends, and about his first request was for something to eat and drink. Then, while eating, he told the story of his wanderings and adventures.

The belief that Arthur's trail was being followed by cowboys or soldiers created much excitement, and many of the Tigers were for moving on.

"We'll ambush and kill the whole outfit, if they're the cowboys!" Tiger Dan hotly asserted, and in accordance with this plan, though not all of them favored it, the outlaws remained in the mesquite, sending a man to the top of the nearest hill to spy out and report the character and number of the foe.

That the cowboys were coming became a certainty in a few minutes.

A peculiar split in the toe of the right front hoof of the horse had told the cowboys it was the one Snowflake Sam had ridden, and a footprint made at a point where he had dismounted had assured them that the rider was Arthur Benson.

The cowboys were nearly all experts at reading "sign" of this character, though few of them were better at it than Orrin Jude, the veteran Rope King.

Huldah was with them still. She was as brown as a berry, sunburned and wind-chafed, but the violent exercise seemed to have done her good, for she had never been better able to endure fatigue. Perhaps her anxiety for the safety of her foster father and Snowflake Sam made her strong to stand much.

Orrin's eagle eye prevented the catastrophe into which they seemed to be running. Glancing far ahead, a momentary gleam of reflected light attracted his attention. He knew that it came from steel—the steel of a gun barrel or a knife.

Still, he did not reveal his discovery by so much as a movement. He rode right on, watching the hill where the light had shone.

A little later he saw it again, lower down this time, and nearer the mesquite.

Then he knew that within that mesquite lay armed men, and the scene pictured itself before his mental vision. Either white men or red had set a trap there for the cowboys, and the gleam had come from the weapon of a scout or lookout posted on the top of the hill.

He communicated to his followers the nature of his discovery.

"Swing right along as if I wasn't talkin'!" he added. "They're watchin' us. We'll drive right up toward that mesquite, and then we'll separate—half goin' north of it an' half south, and we'll jist tarnally fill that bresh so full o' lead that we'll set it afire!"

At about the same moment Tiger Dan was instructing his men and talking with Arthur, confident that the character of the ambush was complete and that the surprise would be overwhelming.

Tiger Dan did not dream that the ambush had been discovered, until the cowboys divided into two parts and swung one to the right and the other to the left, going with almost the speed of the wind, and firing their Winchesters into the heart of the grove.

Some of the shots took effect, so accurately had the cowboys judged, and a panic broke out among the outlaws.

Tiger Dan lifted his rifle for a reply, but his followers were too much rattled to imitate him.

Instead, they leaped for their horses.

Two of the horses were down, kicking and threshing and creating consternation among the others.

"Stop, you fools!" Tiger Dan bellowed.

To enforce his order, he seized one of the men. As it happened, it was a most unfortunate thing; for no sooner had Tiger Dan laid hold of the man than a ball struck the man in the head, killing him instantly.

He dropped like a log of wood; and Tiger Dan, relinquishing his hold with a curse, began again to bawl his commands.

But that shot completed the panic already so well under way.

Those who could get to their horses did so, and made a dash out of the mesquite.

Seeing that the panic could not be stopped, Tiger Dan wrested from one of his men the bridle rein he had gathered, and, leaping to the back of the horse, galloped also out of the grove, followed by the bitter revillings of the men and by shots from his revolver.

As soon as he was clear of the bushes, Tiger Dan saw the two bands of cowboys sweeping back for the purpose of repeating their tactics.

His men had poured from all sides of the grove and were in flight over the mesa.

Just ahead of him, spurring as if his life depended on it, was Arthur Benson.

Tiger Dan gave him a bitter look and lifted the revolver that swung at his hip as if to take a shot at Arthur. But he thought better of it, dropped the revolver, and permitted Arthur to race on.

Like a whirlwind the cowboys came down again. Miss Huldah, however, dismounted beyond the mesquite, drawing out of the fight because she loathed its necessity and because she saw on the ground a wounded outlaw who seemed to need aid.

She was sure her friends would be victors; she was likewise of the opinion that neither her father nor Moxie were with this band, and duty called her to render assistance to the wounded man, who seemed in almost a dying condition.

She gave him water out of the bottle at her side, and, wetting a strip of cloth torn from the lining of his coat, applied it as a bandage to his head. He was shot in the breast, and she did not think he could recover.

When she had finished these ministrations she noticed that the cowboys and the outlaws, pursuing and pursued, were scattered widely, and that other forms were lying not far away.

Remounting, she rode to one of these—and was astonished to find Tiger Dan in a dying condition.

He had turned back, when near the end of the mesquite grove, thinking to escape more easily by a backward dash through the cowboys' thinned ranks; and, just when it seemed he might be successful, a bullet from a Winchester had cut him down.

His horse had galloped away, and no one had approached him till Huldah came up.

He recognized her.

"I reckon I'm done for!" he gasped. "I on'y wish that fellow had made quicker work of it, for this pain cuts like a knife!"

She was at his side in an instant, pressing the water bottle to his lips.

"Where is father?" she asked. "Father and Moxie?"

A look of the old fire came back for a moment, and he seemed on the point of speaking harshly; but it passed, and he told her he did not know, though they were likely with the Apaches, if alive.

She thought he was gaining strength, until there came a gush of blood from his wound. When it had passed, it left him

so weak that she saw he was fast sinking.

He realized it, too.

"You're a good woman," he avowed. "If I'd been a good man I'd feel better now. But that's past. I've made my bed, an' must lay in it!"

She tried to comfort him with Bible verses and religious thoughts, but he turned from them.

"I've lived the life of a devil, and I die as I've lived. There ain't any hope for such a man as me!"

The words, which were fairly wailed, were followed by another hemorrhage, and when it ended his life ended with it.

Huldah, when she saw he was dead, rose from her knees with strangely mingled feelings; but in her heart there was no place for hatred, only for forgiveness.

She saw that some of the cowboys were returning, and two of them were bringing back prisoners.

Orrin Jude had set himself in pursuit of the false Arthur Benson.

Arthur, when he saw he was being pushed by Orrin, whirled about in his saddle and fired his Winchester.

The ball flew wild, and he tried to fire the weapon again, to find that he had shot out the only cartridge it held, and that his cartridge belt was empty.

A cry of fear came from his lips when he made these disconcerting discoveries.

Turning again in flight, he struck the rowels viciously into the sides of his pony; and, failing to get from it enough speed in that way, used the gun barrel as a cudgel against its ribs and hips.

The pony leaped on at its best speed, but the one ridden by Orrin Jude was the speedier, and slowly gained.

They drew rapidly away from the other cowboys and outlaws, and in a very few minutes had the whole field to themselves.

Seeing that Arthur's gun was useless, Orrin Jude was determined to take him alive.

Once he half lifted the rifle he carried across the pommel, with the intention of shooting Arthur's pony and bringing the race to a speedy end, but his innate love of horses made him withhold the shot.

Bending far over in the saddle, his face writhing with the fear that had taken possession of him, Arthur coaxed his pony on, at such times as he was not cudgeling it with the rifle or harrowing its sides with the spurs.

But all was unavailing. The pony's breath was already coming in gasps, like the escape of steam, and it was reeling on its legs, for it had been ridden many hours before the commencement of this race.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard, Orrin Jude drew nearer.

He threw his rifle by its strap across his shoulder and shook out his lariat for a throw.

Arthur, looking back on these preparations, fairly screamed out his fright, dropping to abject fear.

Then the nose of the cowboy's pony came within twenty feet of the other's tail, and Orrin shouted for Arthur to surrender.

When there was no reply, the rope swept like a hissing serpent through the air.

It fell in circling folds over Arthur's head and was jerked tight.

Like a straw Arthur was plucked from the saddle, falling heavily and unconsciously to the ground.

Before he could recover the cowboy was standing over him, tying his hands and feet.

However, Arthur was not seriously hurt, and as the cowboy applied water and liquor, he opened his eyes and tried to struggle to his feet.

His face flushed, and then grew as pale as death when he discovered the cords on hands and ankles.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"As soon as he is rested, I'm going to put you on your pony and take you back to the cowboys. After that, I dunno! Plenty time a heap to see, when we meets up with them!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

DENOUNCED BY APACHE JIM.

Snowflake Sam had so cleverly played the role of the Shining One that he had temporarily secured his own safety and impressed on the medicine man and the Apaches that he was more than an ordinary creature of earth.

He sat now in a skin lodge, wrapped in darkness and phosphorescent shine, while the medicine man stood in the door of the lodge, parleying and talking in broken English.

The fact that Snowflake could not talk or understand Apache had been against him until he had explained to the medicine man that, as he had previously lived on the earth as a white man, he could not be expected to know any other tongue.

Nothing but the strange glow saved this story from utter disbelief. That glow mystified and fascinated the medicine man and commanded his utmost credulity.

The medicine man stepped into the lodge and across it. Snowflake Sam, fearing discovery, had done the phosphorus up into two packages, intending to insert them in the legs of his boots for greater safety, but had been kept from carrying out the plan by the medicine man's appearance.

One of the precious packages he had dropped into a pocket and the other had slid to the floor.

This last the medicine man turned over accidentally with his foot, and then tore it asunder as he took a forward step, scattering it in a glowing track on the ground.

He sprang back in astonishment. But before he could do anything Snowflake Sam picked up the package, solemnly commanded him to stand still, and poured and smeared the preparation over his body.

"You are my brother!" he declared. "You, too, are one of the shining ones. I will tell you how you can make of yourself the greatest medicine man of the Apache nation."

The craft of the medicine man got the better of every other feeling. He knew, now, that Snowflake was but a fraud and a pretender, but he was so anxious to obtain this wonderful knowledge that he fell into the trap.

"Go out first and show your people what I have done to you. Tell them that I have put my hands on you and made you also a Shining One—a medicine man from the skies!"

The medicine man drew his blanket about him, arranging its folds to show the phosphorescent gleam to the best advantage, and stepped proudly away from the lodge, lifting his voice in a medicine song, to attract the attention of his people.

Five minutes later the Apaches were in the throes of an excitement wilder than anything that had recently come on them.

They thronged about the medicine man; and he, elated by their attention, extemporized in song a wonderful story of how he had been touched and kindled with flame by the Shining One, and given the powers which the Shining One was supposed by the Apaches to possess.

There never was a craftier savage; and, observing how effective was the story and how high he had been elevated in the opinion of his people by the strange shine on his few garments and half-naked body, he walked proudly back to the lodge, and, taking Snowflake Sam by the hand, led him forth to join in the dance.

Snowflake Sam was not exactly pleased with this, and doubted its wisdom, but he feared the effect of an objection. So he went along, permitting the medicine man to lead him.

The shrill, screeching yells of the excited Apaches sounded wilder and louder than ever.

To heighten the effect, the medicine man scattered the fire and put it out. He wanted Snowflake Sam to join him in leading a dance, but an Indian dance,

with its jerkiness and monkey-like hops, was something beyond Snowflake Sam, and he refused to make a fool of himself by attempting it.

Thereupon the medicine man set him in the centre of an Indian circle, and led the dance himself, bowing toward Snowflake Sam as toward a king.

Snowflake Sam had never conceived of quite so strange a situation. He did not know whether to fear the final result or regard the whole thing as favorable to himself. Of one thing he felt sure: So long as the medicine man fancied Snowflake could give him points in magic so long could the medicine man's aid be counted on.

Wilder and shriller grew the barbaric chant, jerkier became the movements of the dancers, fiercer sounded the yells.

Truly it was a strange sight: The phosphorescent form of the medicine man leading the dance through the darkness about the equally phosphorescent form of Snowflake Sam.

The sound of a shot cut through this and threw all into confusion. The dancing stopped, the song and cries ended, and the Apaches leaped behind boulders or sprawled themselves in ludicrous haste on the ground.

The medicine man's fear made his actions comical. Thinking an attack was to be made, and knowing that the phosphorescent shine would make his body an easy target for the rifles of the foes, he tried to grab blankets from the shoulders of other Indians and wrap himself in them.

In two or three cases this was resented, and he was sent staggering back by the men he tried to rob. But one young buck relinquished to him his blanket; and, rolling himself in it in great haste, the medicine man fairly hugged the ground.

Snowflake Sam's peril was perhaps as great, but Snowflake did not dare to rip a blanket from an Indian's shoulders, and so sprawled near the centre of the panting group.

Shortly afterward cries from the edge of the camp announced the approach and entrance of a body of Apaches; and the scared braves got on their feet and rushed wildly to ascertain what it all meant, and why the shot had been fired.

A number of Apaches, gathered about a man, streamed toward the camp-fire, which was again kicked and blown into life; and Snowflake Sam saw that the man was a trooper, dressed in army blue, and that his face was bloody, as if from a struggle.

Snowflake's sympathies went out to the poor fellow.

"Well, if they don't kill him soon, the chance may come for us to get away together!"

He did not rise from his position or show undue interest in the trooper's condition.

Then Snowflake Sam saw something he had not before observed, and which changed the entire outlook:

The Apaches who had captured the trooper were under Apache Jim; and in their midst, but bringing up the rear, were two other white prisoners—Benson, the Ranch King, and Miss Moxie.

It was a discovery to thrill Snowflake Sam to the utmost.

How Benson and Moxie came to be with Apache Jim the reader will recall; as also the fact that, though they were still prisoners, he had probably saved them from death.

Apache Jim's party, which had been headed toward the valley, had stumbled on the trooper-scout, who was lying out on the hill watching the dance under shelter of the darkness. The shot had rung out from his rifle.

The suspicions and anger of Apache Jim were now kindled against Snowflake Sam and the medicine man.

Knowing the secret of the phosphoric trick, the belief came to him that Snowflake had tried to draw troopers to the place by the shine and by the wild song and the outcries he had indirectly occasioned.

The bitter hate felt for Snowflake Sam at Benson's ranch swelled again in the half-breed's heart.

Striding straight up to Snowflake, Apache Jim smote him cruelly on the mouth.

"Dog of a white man, who plays with the cold fire and makes fools of my people and their medicine man!"

At this the blood of Snowflake Sam boiled, but he restrained his impulse to knock the half-breed down.

"You have made the big medicine man a child."

Apache Jim might have reviled and abused Snowflake Sam with impunity, but when he declared that the medicine man was a fool he went too far, as he quickly realized.

The medicine man rose beside the Shiner, and, catching Apache Jim by the shoulder, thrust him away.

"Go!" he screamed. "Who is it calls me a child? Go, or I will put the fire on you, and you will feel it eat into your flesh!"

Snowflake Sam caught at the suggestion; and, with a sweep of his hand, he drew out one of the packages, and emptied its contents on the head and body of the half-breed.

The Apaches nearest the half-breed fell back with exclamations of fear and awe, when they saw this and the shine on the face and hair of the half-breed.

A rage seized Apache Jim; and, whipping out a knife, he made a dive for Snowflake's heart.

The medicine man caught the hand, twisted the knife out of it, and sent the weapon spinning over the heads of the crowd.

Then, with a twist as dexterous, he hurled Apache Jim staggering backward.

Almost instantly there was a lining up of two factions in a warlike array; and, while most of the Apaches seemed to favor Apache Jim, a few of the best fighters were on the side of the medicine man and Snowflake Sam.

These latter, crowded by the half-breed's followers, backed slowly, but presenting a bold front. The others pressed them clamorously, and Apache Jim, in loud tones, demanded the death of Snowflake Sam, whom he charged with being the cause of all the trouble.

The medicine man retorted.

In the mean time, the trooper had been thrust into a lodge, with bonds on his wrists and ankles, and the Ranch King and Moxie had been hurried into the shadow of a gorge, under guard.

It was toward this gorge the medicine man was retreating. He knew it would be the best place for him and his friends if a genuine fight came.

Again the sound of a rifle cut the air, with the same magic effect as before; and again the shot was fired by the trooper.

In the haste with which the knots were tied, the work had been so poorly done that the trooper had found no more trouble in twisting out of them than if they were wisps of hay.

Seizing a gun lying near, he had tried to make his way out of the lodge and out of the place. Being seen and rushed on, he had lifted the weapon and discharged it.

By a singular fatality—as if the hand of Providence had guided the missile—it missed the man aimed at and struck Apache Jim, who was, at the moment, crowding hard on the medicine man.

Apache Jim threw up his hands and sunk down in front of his bewildered and enraged followers.

The utmost confusion reigned. Some leaped on the trooper, others lifted the half-breed, and still others continued to press toward the medicine man and Snowflake Sam.

Snowflake Sam grabbed a rifle from the hands of the nearest Indian and leaped with it toward the gorge. The medicine man sprang along at his heels.

Pandemonium seemed to have broken loose, and in the excitement the trooper succeeded in placing himself with Snowflake Sam, while Benson and Moxie shivered in the gorge, fearing death.

When all were together in the gorge, Snowflake Sam thrust a big club into the Ranch King's hands, Miss Moxie picked up a boulder, and the medicine man wheeled about flourishing his knife.

A dozen Indians howled at their heels. Knowing that only vigorous methods would avail, Snowflake Sam fired into their midst.

An Apache dropped dead, and the others fairly fell over each other in their haste to retreat.

It was but a temporary victory. The Apaches regained their heads and began to study how to dislodge these foes without sacrifice of life.

The medicine man commenced to realize how foolish he had been in attaching himself to the fortunes of Snowflake Sam.

There was no opportunity for talk. Snowflake Sam gave his instructions quietly, and then took the post of danger, with the rifle ready for use. He had no hope that they could get out of the gorge, but he was nevertheless resolved to defend it to the last.

For a time everything grew so quiet that one would have been pardoned for thinking the Apaches had abandoned the place.

Then a boulder shot down from the cliff above almost on the head of the Ranch King.

"Crowd close against the wall!" Snowflake Sam whispered.

Other boulders followed, until they fairly rained down, but without damage.

The boulders were followed by torches, dropped into the heart of the gorge. These flamed up for a few seconds and showed the Apaches where to shoot.

Then bullets pattered down, searching out all the shadows. Only the fact that a shelf slightly interposed kept these bullets from finding human targets.

Snowflake Sam did not reply to the firing for some time, and then only because the chance seemed too good to be thrown away. An Apache, in his anxiety to get a better shot than usual, exposed himself, and Snowflake promptly sent a ball through his shoulder.

The cry that came from him as he tumbled back out of sight was echoed from various points and from the valley.

Then torches began to drop again, lighting up the interior of the gorge, and a few minutes later these were followed by burning pieces of wood.

"They can make it unpleasant for us, but there isn't enough wood around here for them to burn us out! So keep under shelter and let them continue the play."

What Snowflake really feared was a rush from the valley while their attention was being diverted by these pyrotechnics. He was sure that was the trick the Apaches were up to.

Then a yell arose.

"We must give them the best we've got!" he said, wheeling to meet the charge. "Here the red devils come!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE CLOUDS CLEAR AWAY.

Let us go back a little.

Orrin Jude seemed unduly elated by his capture of Arthur Benson, while Arthur was quite as much cast down.

When they rejoined the cowboys and Miss Huldah, Arthur made a piteous appeal to her for his liberty, protesting his friendship and his innocence of all the things charged against him.

Huldah told him she could do nothing for him; that she knew him for the pretender, fraud, and criminal that he was.

At that rebuff, Arthur tried to pull himself together and put on a bold face.

"Somebody coming!" sung out a cowboy, and forth from behind a clump of mesquite appeared a column of troopers.

The cowboys awaited their approach, and when the riders came up it was learned they were under command of Captain Arthur Temple, and had been drawn thither by the watchfires burning on the mountains.

The cowboys had seen and studied the same watchfires, and by a comparison

of views the point at which the Apaches were again centring was guessed. Then it was decided that the troopers and cowboys should unite forces and move on the redskins together.

Advancing with much caution, they reached the vicinity of the Indian camp, after nightfall, and sent out scouts to learn what was to be learned.

It was one of these scouts who was captured by the band under Apache Jim.

Guided by reports brought in, the troopers and the cowboys crept close up to the camp under cover of the darkness.

This was not at all difficult, for the Apaches were shooting into the gorge and rolling bits of fire and burning torches down into it, so that the veriest tyro could have located and approached them.

Slowly the whites ringed in the camp and gorge.

A yell came from an Apache, who, wounded, was lying in their path, and discovered them.

This yell it was that made Snowflake face toward the valley, believing that the expected assault of the reds was at hand.

But the yell was drowned by a charging cheer, that brought hope to the hearts of the people in the gorge and consternation to the foes that beset them.

The Apaches retired in haste from the gorge and across the hills and mesas, and in a little while not a living redskin was near the place. Even the medicine man, fearing the troopers, had sneaked out and disappeared.

As successful pursuit was out of the question, so long as the night held, the soldiers and cowboys relighted the campfires and proceeded to get a much-needed supper.

Before this, however, there had been some joyful meetings—Benson and Huldah, Moxie, Snowflake Sam, Orrin Jude: what did not such a reunion mean to all of them?

But one sat apart, scowling blackly at what he beheld and muttering malignant threats. That one was the false Arthur Benson.

Tossed down from his saddle, with hands and feet bound, he was for a time almost forgotten. A big boulder was at his back, sustaining him in an upright position and facing him toward the scenes that kindled such envy and hate in his heart.

A trooper approached him, bearing some supper.

Arthur's eyes glittered.

The trooper put down the tin plate that bore the food, and, stooping over, untied the cords that held the man's wrists.

"Am I the prisoner of the soldiers or of the cowboys?"

"The cowboys, I reckon; but I was ordered to give you something to eat!"

"Thank you. You are very kind!"

The knots came loose. The trooper's head was close to Arthur's. At the trooper's side, in a sheath, was a knife.

This Arthur jerked out and made a thrust at the trooper's heart, but the stroke was not true, the knife caught the trooper in the side, lower down, and sent him reeling backward.

With another motion, Arthur severed the cords that held his ankles, and then sprang for a stack of rifles near.

The wounded cavalryman's cry aroused the camp and threw troopers and cowboys into temporary confusion.

Cocking the rifle as he ran, Arthur sped across the corner of the camp toward the horses, but Sam was on guard, and shouted the halt.

Arthur threw up the rifle, intending to shoot Snowflake. There was the glitter of a fierce joy in his eyes, for, of all men, he hated the Shiner most!

But even as the weapon was lifted as he ran, he struck his foot against a stone and pitched heavily forward.

There was an instant explosion, as the rifle flew out of his hands.

A bound brought Snowflake Sam to his side.

Arthur tried to rise, but sank back, moaning.

Sam saw that he was badly and perhaps fatally hurt. Some cowboys and troopers hurried up, and, under Snowflake's direction, the fellow was lifted and carried to one of the camp-fires.

Benson and Huldah, Moxie and Orrin Jude bent over the injured man.

The ball from the rifle had been discharged into his side as he stumbled and fell, and the wound was of a character to bring speedy death.

The surgeon of the troop told him as much as soon as the examination was made.

"I want to say something, then!" he gasped, with failing breath. "I have played a falsehood, and have lost. I am not the son of Benson, the Ranch King, but am—"

A fit of coughing prevented him from completing the confession of the fact, already known to the reader, that he was a notorious outlaw and confidence man.

The Ranch King hardly needed the words of the dying man to reassure him of the fact that his son stood before him in the person of Snowflake Sam! The rancher had long before had his eyes opened on this subject.

A few words more and the story ends.

The wealth found by Moxie and the Ranch King in the Golden Gorge was great, for, in addition to the free metal, the mine was of such richness that its working paid a fortune.

It belonged to the finders, of course, who developed it after the return of peace made its development practicable; but the reader knows enough of the character of Moxie and the Ranch King to understand that their friends, and all who had aided them, shared largely in the good luck which had become theirs.

Moxie married the man of her choice, Orrin Jude, the Rope King, who, though he was not at all like the knights and lords of her favorite novels, was every inch a man "from the ground up."

And the reader understands, also, that there was another wedding, in which Huldah and Snowflake Sam figured as the principals.

They now reside in Flagstaff, with the Ranch King, who has entirely recovered his former mental strength and promises to be good for many years of life; and they are, as they deserve to be, prosperous and content.

Mad Charley and Moll Almack were duly married, in Flagstaff, and for a long time were proprietors of a popular hotel and lodging house. At present they reside in Los Angeles.

The troopers promptly ended the Apache war by striking the raiding band an annihilating blow, and as for the followers of Tiger Dan, the band was so broken that it disappeared as completely and silently as the snows on the piney slopes about Flagstaff disappear before the springtime sun.

And Benson's Ranch has since known peace.

THE END.

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376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
252 The Wall Street Flood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
101 The Man from New York.
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heat of Fire.
75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
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42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

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